Blight Remediation in the Southeast:

Local Approaches to Design and Implementation

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Abstract:

Blight—or the proliferation of vacant, abandoned, or poorly maintained properties—is a critical community issue in many cities in the Southeast as in other regions of the United States, as economic shifts experienced in the past few decades have changed neighborhoods significantly. Municipalities dealing with this issue recognize what is well documented in the literature—that blight is associated with social, economic, environmental, and public health effects on neighborhoods. The recent recession has led to a surge of abandoned and bank-owned properties, disproportionately located in poor and unstable neighborhoods. The causes of blight vary by city and even by neighborhood, but many cities are dealing with blighted parcels as a result of some combination of suburbanization, population decline, job losses (particularly in the manufacturing sector), foreclosures, and natural events that render structures or lots unusable. Southeastern cities are also unique in that lower population densities often deter revitalization.

To understand how various blight remediation strategies have been implemented, we selected two case study communities for analysis, which included extensive interviews with local stakeholders. We chose New Orleans, Louisiana, and Macon, Georgia, based on their location, size, the extent of their blight issues, and their commitment to blight remediation. New Orleans and Macon have each experienced significant blight and are leaders in the Southeast in creating and refining robust strategies for combating blight.

This paper describes several findings in terms of regional blight remediation efforts. Lessons learned include the importance of data collection and visualization, the need for an overarching, jurisdiction-wide blight strategy, the value of transparent and realistic metrics, the need for strong leadership and strategic partnerships that leverage political will and resources, the need for public participation, and the effectiveness of strategies such as strong code enforcement and land banking over expropriation or eminent domain.

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Blight is a critical community issue in many southeastern cities, as economic shifts experienced in the past few decades have changed neighborhoods significantly. Municipalities dealing with this issue recognize firsthand what is well documented in the literature—that blight is associated with social, economic, environmental, and public health effects on neighborhoods (the Vacant Properties Research Network, 2015). These blighted areas incur direct and indirect costs, which may include decreased tax revenues and property values, and increased costs of city services to maintain and remedy these properties (National Vacant Properties Campaign, 2005 and Accordino, 2002). The recent recession has led to a surge of abandoned and real estate owned properties, which are disproportionately located in poor and unstable neighborhoods. The causes of blight vary by city, and even by neighborhood, but the literature and our research on select cities indicate that many cities are dealing with blighted parcels as a result of some combination of population decline, job losses (particularly in the manufacturing sector), foreclosures, and natural events that render structures or lots unusable.

While blight remediation is a priority for many municipalities across the country, this paper is focused on examples from the Southeast. There are many commonalities among cities across the country dealing with blight. However, we also found unique aspects of southeastern cities, such as lower population densities (Kaza, 2013), that contribute to the nature of blight in the region.

This discussion paper describes several bright spots in terms of regional blight remediation efforts—specifically New Orleans, Louisiana, and Macon-Bibb County (hereafter, referred to as Macon unless otherwise specified), Georgia. This paper provides practitioners and others interested in blight remediation with two types of information: 1) a summary of strategies that may be used by local government and its partners to address blight and 2) detailed information on how these strategies are implemented. A brief summary of strategies is included in Table 1, and the strategies used in each case study location are described in their respective sections. Details about implementation are found in the case studies and a set of concluding recommendations for policy and practice.

The main purpose of this study is to give local policymakers, practitioners, community organizations, and affordable housing advocates timely and relevant information that may aid their own blight remediation efforts. We hope that a better understanding of the successes and challenges in our selected cities will inform the design and implementation of policies and programs elsewhere.

Defining blight

An investigation of blight in a locale often begins with two components: 1) determining the language to describe and categorize the local conditions and 2) understanding the scope of the problem through data and analysis. This section focuses on the first aspect. The language question is important because it requires a municipality to understand the context that resulted in blighted properties. This was a critical first step in New Orleans and Macon because it shed light on local issues that could be resolved through policy and programming, including strengthening ordinances, increasing enforcement and capacity, streamlining the foreclosure process, and others. "Blight" itself has problematic connotations and can lead to extreme solutions such as urban renewal or wholesale clearance of properties regardless of viability.

Blight is generally defined by the Center for Community Progress and other national organizations as a local proliferation of vacant, abandoned, and "problem" properties that may result when a variety and combination of social, economic, and financial conditions are at play.[1] As described in these terms, *vacant* refers to an unoccupied property, *abandoned* describes a property lacking investment by the owner(s), and *problem* is a property type that is causing some type of nuisance to surrounding residents (Alexander, 2015).

Federal and state definitions for blight remediation funding and programs lack consistency, according to the literature. For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines a blighted structure as one that "exhibits objectively determinable signs of deterioration sufficient to constitute a threat to human health, safety, and public welfare" (HUD User Glossary, 2015), but this definition does not address the issue of blighted parcels without structures.

Both New Orleans and Macon developed locally tailored definitions of blight as the first step in designing their blight remediation plans. They also developed categorizations of blight based on local conditions in order to segment their overall strategy appropriately. As Macon blight task force members were working to craft a definition of blight that would be accepted by the public, a trio of journalism entities—the *Telegraph* (Macon's local newspaper), Georgia Public Broadcasting, and Mercer University's Center for Collaborative Journalism—asked public meeting attendees in 2014 to provide their definition of blight. According to their reports, almost all respondents pointed to parcels with either residential or commercial property; very few described parcels without structures. After reviewing other jurisdictions' definition of blight and considering the community's feedback, the work group put forth the following definition:

> Structures, land, or features that are neglected, abandoned, not maintained in a clean, safe, or healthy condition; and/or pose a severe or immediate health, safety, or undue economic hardship, or other imminent hazard to the property owners, occupants or visitors in the vicinity of the site.

Macon also adopted a blight grading scale based on the 2012 International Property Maintenance Code, which classifies structures as A (excellent), B (good), C (average), D (distressed), and F (failing).

In a somewhat longer and more detailed form, the New Orleans City Code establishes a formal legal definition for blight, which includes any property that is declared a public nuisance; demonstrates chronic vacancy or unresolved code violations for unsafe, unsanitary, or unhealthy conditions; is a fire hazard; is vermin infested or lacking in facilities or equipment required by the housing code of the city; is in such a state of deterioration that it creates a substantial adverse impact on neighboring properties; is uninhabitable due to natural or human-made disaster and poses a serious threat to the public; is determined to be a "demolition by neglect"; or is vacant property either abandoned or owned by a person found guilty of failure to maintain the lot in municipal court.

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[1] The National Vacant Properties Campaign merged with the Genesee Institute to form the Center for Community Progress in 2010.

Generally, blight in the Southeast follows the pattern of other regions of the country, with deindustrialization and suburbanization leading to disinvestment in the urban core of many cities. The timing of urbanization in the Southeast relative to other parts of country has contributed to its spatial patterns, and in some ways, to political and economic structures that may create a unique context in which blight issues are addressed (Lloyd, 2012). Also worth considering is the way in which the foreclosure crisis swept parts of the Southeast (Immergluck, 2009), and the fact that it left large numbers of homes in various stages of blight.

What is the extent of the blight?

The question of blight definition is challenging, but it may be surpassed by the problem of identifying the extent of blight through data. Experts do not agree on a national estimate of blighted parcels, and consensus on the number of blighted parcels in a local jurisdiction is often elusive. This is due in part to local variations in definition, as described in the previous section. Blighted parcels in a jurisdiction might include some or all of the following types of parcels:

- Vacant structures (residential and commercial)
- Vacant lots
- Abandoned structures (residential and commercial)
- Parcels (with and without structures) that are in violation of code

There is also a wide array of existing municipal records and other blight-specific data collection tools used to count and track blight. A major aspect of anti-blight efforts in many municipalities is the migration of governmental records onto one common platform, to ensure consistency in the data and a technological "commons" for communicating among departments and exchanging data.

Data collection and analysis are critical to understanding the scope of the local issue and the concentration of blighted properties by neighborhood, but exact numbers may not be as important as the magnitude of the problem. To develop programs and policies, it is less critical to know if a location has 5,000 or 5,001 blighted properties as it is to understand whether it has 50,000, 5,000, or 500.

At the national level, HUD began acquiring and publishing quarterly extracts of U.S. Postal Service (USPS) data in 2005 that show addresses identified as vacant. As noted on the HUD website, there are some minor limitations with the data; for example, some attempts by USPS to make the data more accurate around March 2010 may have rendered any longitudinal comparisons that include that time frame to be inaccurate. In addition, the data include all vacant properties, including those that are not characteristic of blight, such as well-maintained homes that are unoccupied.

USPS data were used by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center's analysis that suggested that out of 203,630 residential units in New Orleans, there were approximately 43,755 (21 percent) blighted homes and empty lots in New Orleans in September 2010.[2] The data also indicated there were another 9,356 (5 percent) vacant but habitable housing units. At that time, there were 159,875 active (assumed occupied) residential homes in New Orleans (Plyer, 2012). In 2011, to address

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[2] As of 2013, renamed the Data Center.

this problem, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu projected that his administration would eliminate 10,000 blighted parcels from the city. Just three years later, he announced success in reaching that goal in the city's *Blight Reduction Report* (City of New Orleans, 2014). Some media outlets questioned whether the city had actually hit the 10,000 mark of remediated sites (Maldonado, 2014). The figure was based on a University of New Orleans neighborhood survey of about 2,000 homes in 39 Census block groups that represent the entirety of the flood zone, and the university's methodology included counting properties directly affected by the administration's blight reduction efforts *and* those that were rehabilitated as an indirect result or simply by happenstance. Although data collection in New Orleans has improved and is discussed in the case study below, this example illustrates the point that data analysis may be more effective as a general progress gauge than a hard-and-fast success metric.

In Macon, the recently organized Blight Task Force recommended a county-wide survey to identify the number and gradation of blighted parcels. Local agency heads recognize that this information is critical to refining their strategy, so they plan to expedite the data collection and analysis. Although currently somewhat limited, the Macon experts are working with the following data that reflect August 2015 records. The tax assessor's records show a total of 68,156 residential and commercial parcels. The code enforcement division has cited 2,965 (4 percent) as having some type of blight—1,214 (2 percent) of those are unsafe structures, and the remainder are blighted by exterior, interior, or yard aesthetics. The New Orleans and Macon data differ in that the Data Center report on New Orleans counted all vacant properties, blighted or viable, and Macon's survey counted all blighted properties, vacant or occupied. Differences such as this underscore the difficulty in determining both a definition of blight and a reasonable way to measure it in a given jurisdiction.

New Orleans and Macon illustrate different challenges related to understanding the scope of the local blight problem through data collection and analysis. New Orleans exemplifies how a hard number may be difficult to work toward as a definitive target, though it may successfully galvanize a community around the issue. And Macon highlights the need for countywide information on the number and type of blighted properties in order to refine strategies and prioritize neighborhoods. It can be difficult to explain in the public discourse why this step is so critical (and may even be perceived as inertia on the part of the agencies and organizations involved), when there is already a strategy under way and public momentum around it.

Approaches to addressing blight

This paper focuses on case studies in the Southeast region, but the approaches are more widely applicable. Even so, a local blight remediation strategy should be tailored to the locality's unique characteristics. For instance, there may be differences in blight approaches based on whether the municipality is facing a declining population base or not. In fact, some municipalities' blight strategies are categorized under the so-called right-sizing approach being used in some cities, and particularly in those with declining populations (Hummel, 2014). Additionally, there may be differences in approaches to addressing urban versus rural blight. This can depend on whether appropriate ordinances are in place to categorize and address blighted or nuisance parcels. Some rural areas may not have local policies and processes to enable action on these parcels. Finally, the Southeast, like politically similar areas of the

United States, tends to have broader private property rights, which can limit or make more cumbersome a local government's ability to take and/or transfer ownership. These circumstances may require state legislation revisions to enable comprehensive blight remediation approaches.

There are many tools for policymakers and practitioners to use in addressing blight, and a comprehensive strategy usually includes several of them. The table that follows summarizes the policies and programs that are used in our profiled locations, as well as some key considerations.

Table 1. Summary of Policy and Programmatic Tools to Address Blight

Strategy type	Defining characteristics	Governing ordinances, legislation	Legal, policy, and funding issues
Real property data information system	System used to distribute gather, consolidate, and synthesize the meaning of the real property data over time or in geographic areas (including vacancy, property transactions, property condition, tax, mortgage and lien, utility, and code adherence status) to community organizations and municipal agencies. Real property data systems are often housed outside of local government in other entities (e.g., universities) that serve as data intermediaries.	Ordinances and/or legislation may be needed to ensure the data are made available to the public, particularly for data such as property sales and mortgage data that may be challenging to get from local government agencies.	There may exist policy agreements about the process and responsibility for sharing, housing, and tracking data over time. It is also critical that the appropriate legal and/or policy foundations exist to ensure the data are publicly available.
Vacant property condition survey	A way that communities implement and collect information for a real property data information system. Parcel-level data collected focuses on vacancy status and various problem indicators, often usually physical markers and information. This information can then be compared with and added to the real property information system to create a more robust and comprehensive data set. Community mapping is often a component.	Typically, none needed.	Potential legal issues include liability of using volunteers for data collection, specifically around ensuring they gather the information in a safe manner and do not trespass on private property or exceed their authority. For this reason, it is imperative to provide written guidance and formal training to volunteers. Additionally, funding is a key consideration related to condition surveys, as they can be costly to administer. It is also critical that the appropriate legal and/or policy foundations exist to ensure the data are publicly available.
Vacant property registration ordinance	Ordinance that often requires owners to register vacancy properties with the municipal government after a period of vacancy, and many of these ordinances also expressly apply to properties in mortgage foreclosure. Registration often includes	States where home rule is strong may not need state enabling legislation, though where Dillon's rule is applied, local authorities may be specifically granted power to	Usually civil penalties, though some jurisdictions specify some related offenses as criminal for failure to register and/or follow rules for property maintenance.

Strategy type	Defining characteristics	Governing ordinances, legislation	Legal, policy, and funding issues
	periodic registration fees and the maintenance and securing of properties in specified ways.	adopt such ordinances by state statute.[3] Some states require registration at the state level and/or preempt such local ordinances (Immergluck, 2012).	
Cleaning, greening, beautification, or safety improvements	These programs are often run by local government and/or community-based organizations. These may be offered in exchange for discounted purchase price for property acquisition. Some distinguishing characteristics of these programs (as compared to nuisance abatement strategies, see below) may include a component of community participation and use of public property for the program improvements.	Typically, none needed.	Many programs do not result in a purchase or lease of the parcel(s); these have no or minimal enforcement mechanisms. Land use policies may need to be revised to allow for long-term leasing of vacant lots for community gardens and agriculture.
Code enforcement	Code enforcement seeks compliance with all applicable building, housing, health, and zoning laws that apply to properties and structures. Code enforcement officers actively inspect properties for code violations and assess property and neighborhoods conditions for blighted properties. Unaddressed code violations (after notice, hearing, and specified period of time) can result in the local government taking further administrative and/or legal actions. In some states, cities can take code enforcement actions and make them first-priority liens against property for the foreclosure. The judgment is against the property, rather than the property owner (Alexander et al., 2014).	State and local laws address building, housing, health, and zoning.	Code enforcement can raise legal and policy issues related to inspections and the different enforcement actions (see below for information on **administrative, civil litigation, and criminal prosecution** actions) that a local government can take for noncompliance. Many code enforcement agencies work closely with their municipal attorney to identify legal and policy issues as well as file cases in court on their behalf.

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[3] States in which Dillon's rule is applied afford limited authority to municipal governments.

Strategy type	Defining characteristics	Governing ordinances, legislation	Legal, policy, and funding issues
Administrative remedies	An approach in which the local government may issue property maintenance tickets (like parking tickets) for noncompliance that impose small civil penalties; these cases are often heard by property maintenance review boards.	Similar to code enforcement, state and local laws address building, housing, health, and zoning.	Owners are notified to appear at public hearing and if found guilty of unremediated code violations, the hearing officer or commission may impose civil penalties for not maintaining property to code. Fines unpaid by a set date are either turned into liens against property and/or added to tax bill.
Civil injunction	Civil lawsuit seeking injunctive relief (of the behaviors or state of the property constituting the nuisance), penalties and costs, and administrative hearings.	Similar to code enforcement, state and local laws address building, housing, health, and zoning.	As an enforcement action resulting from code enforcement, civil injunction can raise legal and policy issues.
Criminal prosecution	Code enforcement in many jurisdictions currently involves criminal prosecution of the property owner for unremediated code violations.	Similar to code enforcement, state and local laws address building, housing, health, and zoning.	As an enforcement action resulting from code enforcement, criminal prosecution can raise legal and policy issues.
Nuisance abatement strategy	Nuisance abatement refers to the process by which local governments are authorized by state law to abate the nuisance and then assess the costs against the property, which then becomes a special assessment on property taxes (Vacant Properties Research Network, 2015). Cities can often intervene with demolition or abatement during code enforcement process if necessary to maintain health and safety. Superpriority status enables code violations to be assessed as priority liens, enforced against the property, and collectable with delinquent real property taxes.	Nuisance abatement ordinances; superpriority nuisance abatement liens require special state enabling legislation.	The majority of states have codified the ability of local governments to abate public nuisance conditions on properties using an administrative process, civil injunction, or criminal prosecution. To deploy this strategy appropriately to address local conditions, attention must be directed to allocation of adequate resources (both of funding and staffing).
Demolition	Deconstruction and removal of all or part of a parcel, often happens during the nuisance abatement process if deemed necessary to maintain health and safety or		Again, to deploy this strategy appropriately to address local conditions, attention must be directed to allocation of adequate resources (both of funding and staffing).

Strategy type	Defining characteristics	Governing ordinances, legislation	Legal, policy, and funding issues
	with transfer of ownership to city/land bank where there is funding.		
Land banks and land banking	Government entities created to acquire title to hold, manage, and develop tax-foreclosed properties efficiently that have been rejected by the open market. Ideally, can extinguish taxes and liens in coordination with tax assessor and code enforcement office (Alexander, 2015).	State enabling legislation is required. State tax foreclosure processes need to provide land banks with the opportunity to acquire abandoned property before it becomes available to private entities, especially speculators (Alexander, 2015).	Land banks can provide legal tools to ensure that tax-foreclosed property is developed with the long-term interest of the community and surrounding property owners in mind. Another important component in establishing and operating a land bank is appropriately identifying and accessing funding streams and mechanisms.
Delinquent real property tax enforcement	This approach takes different forms, depending on the municipality and the governing state laws. Some locales conduct tax foreclosures, under which nonpayment of taxes results in the property being conveyed to the municipality. Other municipalities use tax sales, which involves a sale of the lien and/or the property. And some allow private parties to purchase the liens (often in bulk sale transactions). In these arrangements, the property is not conveyed to the private party (Alexander, 2000).	Always subject to state law; often subject to state constitutions and U.S. Constitution.	Enforcement mechanisms vary greatly depending on the approach taken (tax foreclosures, tax sales, and sales of tax liens to private parties) and the judicial involvement in the process per the state law.
Spot blight eminent domain (also called expropriation)	"Spot blight" eminent domain, or the power to use eminent domain to take individual abandoned properties, exists under the laws of many states. Public agency takes full ownership of property by paying full appraised value to property owner(s) for property determined blighted by code enforcement hearing.	State enabling legislation is required for municipalities to exercise spot blight eminent domain/condemnation. Local governments often charter special redevelopment authorities with powers of eminent domain as provided by state law.	Some states have "quick-take" mechanisms included in their legislation to avoid lengthy delays that allow further deterioration in abandoned properties (Mallach, 2012).

Strategy type	Defining characteristics	Governing ordinances, legislation	Legal, policy, and funding issues
Vacant property receivership (also called possession or conservatorship)	As part of civil litigation/injunction, a court appoints a property manager—a municipality or a qualified nonprofit entity—as "receiver" of the property to rehabilitate it (Kelly, 2004). Receivership status enables the entity to borrow and spend money to rehabilitate the property, and it can place liens against the property for the amount spent (Kelly, 2004 and Center for Community Progress, 2015).	State law is often required and preferred.	After the property has been rehabilitated, the owner may be able to regain control by making the receiver whole, or the property is sold by the court or by the receiver (Kelly, 2004 and Center for Community Progress, 2015).

Case Studies

To understand how various blight remediation strategies have been implemented, we selected two case study communities for analysis. New Orleans and Macon were chosen based on their location, size, the extent of their blight issues, and their commitment to blight remediation. For both communities, the city-level rather than metropolitan-level geography was examined. Each city is comprised of a single county or parish (the county equivalent in Louisiana). In January 2014, Macon City consolidated with the larger Bibb County area, forming Macon-Bibb County. The city of New Orleans and Orleans Parish are also conterminous. For brevity, Macon-Bibb County is referred to as Macon in most instances.

Demographic and economic statistics on New Orleans, Macon, and the United States are shown in Table 2. Both New Orleans and Macon have a majority African-American population with homeownership rates and median household incomes lower than the national average, and poverty, unemployment, and vacancy rates that exceed the national average. In New Orleans, the median housing value is 4 percent higher and the median gross rent is 1 percent higher than the national average, while in Macon the median housing value is 30 percent lower and the median gross rent is 19 percent lower. The high price of housing in New Orleans is due in part to a post-Katrina shortage of affordable housing. Combined with the high poverty and unemployment rates in New Orleans, these inflated housing prices have exacerbated income inequality.

Table 2: Demographic and Economic Statistics

	New Orleans	Macon	United States
Population	357,013	155,524	311,536,594
Percent African-American	59.8%	52.2%	12.6%
Homeownership Rate	47.3%	54.4%	64.9%
Median Household Income	$37,146	$37,550	$53,046
Poverty Rate	27.3%	24.9%	15.4%
Unemployment*	7.0%	8.1%	6.2%
Median Home Value	$183,700	$123,000	$176,700
Median Gross Rent	$926	$736	$904
Total Vacancy Rate	21.9%	18.9%	12.5%
Homeowner Vacancy Rate	4.5%	3.9%	2.2%
Rental Vacancy Rate	11.0%	13.9%	7.3%

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2013 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimate, *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics labor force data by county, 2014 annual averages

The two cities were selected by reviewing publicly available resources about blight strategies, such as media reports and open records, and through conversations with housing and neighborhood stabilization experts in the Federal Reserve's Sixth District.[4] While other communities arose as potential case study subjects, the consensus from those familiar with the topic was that New Orleans and Macon

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[4] The Sixth District includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

have each experienced significant blight and are leaders in the Southeast in creating and refining robust strategies for combating blight.

Interview subjects were chosen from city departments engaged in blight remediation such as city leadership (mayoral staff, city council, and county commissioners), code enforcement, housing authorities, development authorities, community and economic development, and planning and zoning; community-based organizations and other nonprofits such as community development corporations and neighborhood leaders; and academics and think tanks.

New Orleans Case Study

Although some outside of the area believe the current blight problem in New Orleans is solely related to Hurricane Katrina, disinvestment issues stretch back much further and were only intensified by the storm. During recent interviews, anti-blight stakeholders in New Orleans expressed that the primary cause of blight in New Orleans is the declining population, as shown in Figure 1. From a peak in 1960 to a trough in 2010, New Orleans has lost 283,696 residents, or 45 percent of its population, in part due to sprawl to the surrounding suburbs. Employment has also declined, with the waning oil industry in Louisiana hastening job losses in the 1980s. The housing stock in the area is aging, and although New Orleans is renowned for its historical architecture, many older homes are not necessarily worthy of preservation. The climate of New Orleans, with its heat, humidity, and susceptibility to storms, has caused further damage to these structures, both occupied and unoccupied. Moreover, Hurricane Katrina caused great damage to much of the city, including many residential neighborhoods and the city's entire inventory of public housing units.

Figure 1: Population of New Orleans, 1900–2010
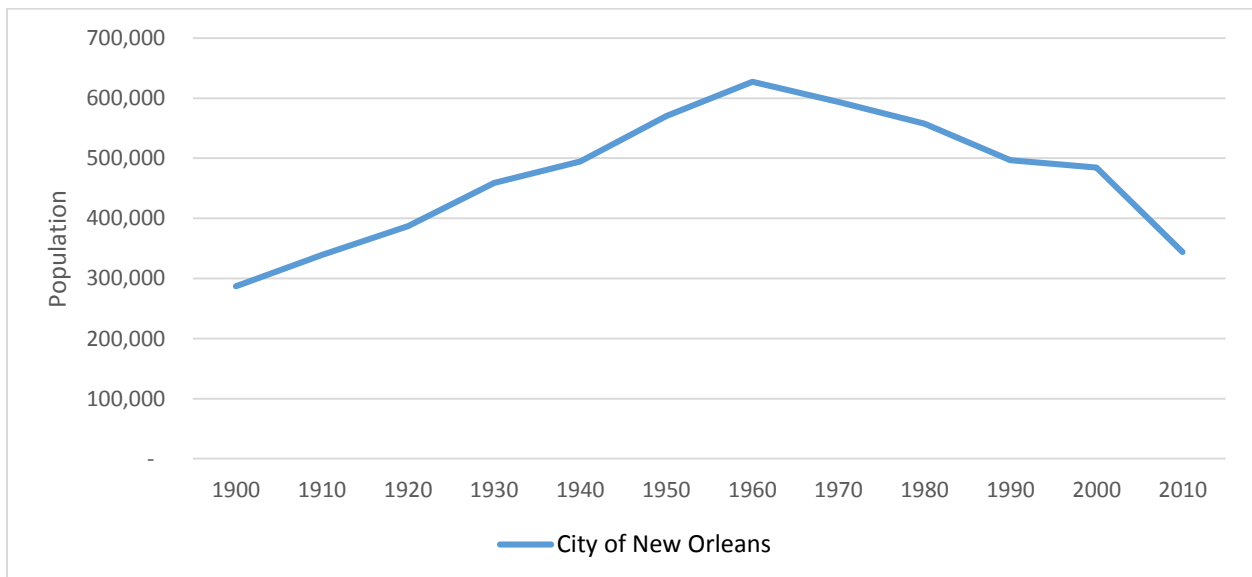
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census

Administrative issues have intensified the blight problem. New Orleans focused its early blight remediation efforts on expropriation or eminent domain. Unfortunately, this technique was prohibited by a state constitutional amendment in 2006, in reaction to the Supreme Court's interpretation of eminent domain in its *Kelo v. City of New London* decision (Marcello, 2007). Expropriation requires a lengthy judgment process associated with government acquisition of private property, known as a regulatory "taking," which hampered progress toward blight eradication. Historically, poor parcel record keeping and undocumented or poorly documented property ownership have made tracking difficult, complicating any strategy other than expropriation.

Despite these issues, New Orleans has many extremely strong housing submarkets such as Uptown, Marigny, and Bywater. Central City is an example of a previously blighted community that has overcome stagnation. It was privy to extensive targeted investment for redevelopment.

New Orleans has engaged in several strategies to combat blight. Perhaps most significantly, New Orleans created BlightSTAT, a program led by the Office of Performance and Accountability that brings leaders together from the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) and the departments of code enforcement, community development, information technology and innovation, and law. The initial thrust of the program was to eliminate 10,000 blighted properties by 2014 in a transparent and accessible manner. BlightSTAT currently meets once a month for a comprehensive performance review and to gain feedback from the public, which has been actively involved in discussions.

Code enforcement resulting in either nuisance abatement (compliance) or demolition has been the most prevalent strategy used to eradicate blight in New Orleans. This process is outlined in Figure 2. The success of code enforcement has been achieved through a reorganization of departments with a renewed focus on performance metrics and a revision of the program to target compliance rather than punitive actions. The process often begins with a 311 call or resident complaint about a property. Following this notification, an inspection is conducted. Extensive research on ownership of the property is conducted and notice is served to the property owners and heirs. In the case of an administrative judgment of code violations, the property owner must either pay the associated fines and bring the property into compliance or face a code lien judgment. Louisiana has superpriority status for code liens, which means the city is able to decide whether the lien should be foreclosed upon or the property demolished. Demolition is used infrequently, with only 212 demolitions in 2014 compared with 1,041 properties brought into compliance.[5] Foreclosures and sheriff's sales are more common, although they are complicated.

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority is not a formal land bank; however, it has acquired and continues to acquire properties such as those bought out under Road Home, HUD's post-Katrina assistance program. NORA differs from a land bank with receivership in that it does not automatically receive properties acquired by the city, such as tax delinquent parcels. New Orleans is currently

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[5] http://www.nola.gov/getattachment/d7f457f3-1104-432b-ae22-459c9b3fef20/ResultsNOLA-Year-End-Report/

considering a receivership program to acquire and rehabilitate vacant properties similar to that used in Baltimore since the 1990s.[6]

Figure 2: Blight Reduction Process in New Orleans[7]
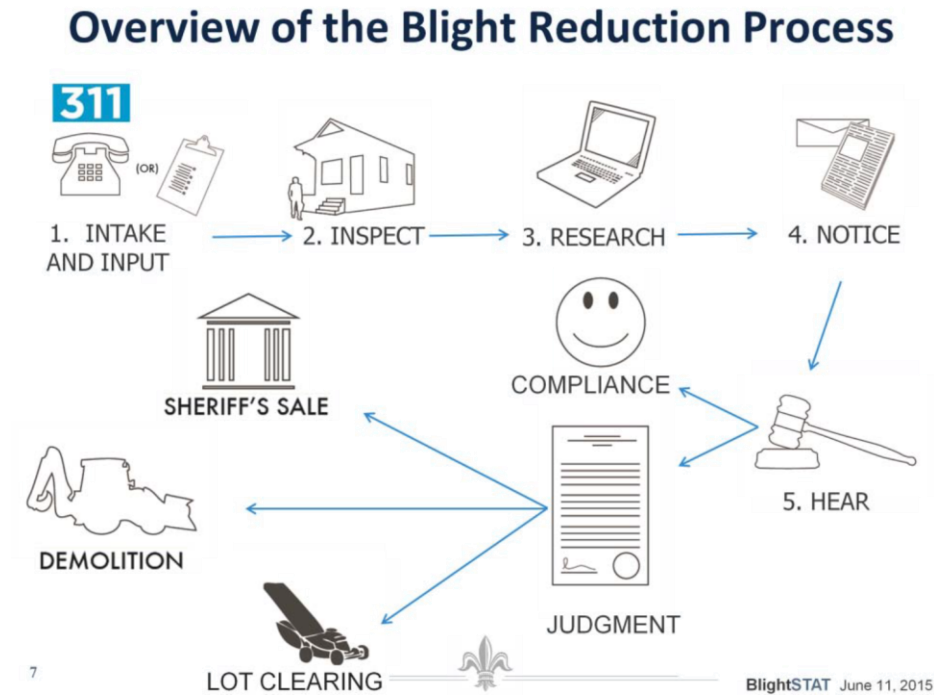
Source: BlightSTAT

Real estate information systems are also used in New Orleans, including the open access BlightSTATUS tool and the geographic information system (GIS)-based LAnd MAnagement (LAMA) system. BlightSTATUS is publicly available and searchable by browsing the map, by address, or by filter variables such as type of case and filing date. The tool provides all case information and outcomes, such as inspection results, violations, hearings, and judgments, as well as parcel, tax, and ownership details. Users can also create an account and monitor property developments via email alert.

LAMA is the comprehensive data management system used by all city departments to track property information, including permitting, licensing, and code enforcement. Through New Orleans' open-data portal, users can access LAMA records to search and browse code enforcement and permitting, inspections, hearings, demolitions, code lien foreclosures and sheriff's sales, NORA properties returned to commerce, and blight abatement data.

Other real estate information systems noted in interviews included previous vacant property censuses, a market value analysis by the Reinvestment Fund, and efforts by the city to update 2007 and 2008 Google Street View imagery to reflect recovery (it is currently possible to view current and historic imagery to compare post-Katrina progress).

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[6] http://www.communityprogress.net/filebin/pdf/new_resrcs/Kelly_Refreshing.pdf
[7] BlightSTAT May 2015 meeting, Office of Performance and Accountability

Prevention and stabilization approaches have also been undertaken in New Orleans, including the Chapter 66 abatement process, whereby the city cuts grass, removes trash and debris, and removes noxious plants such as poison ivy. The Covenant House youth homeless shelter has a contract for in-kind services to provide lawn maintenance for these properties. NORA also maintains vacant properties with its Growing Green program for community gardens, orchards, and other green infrastructure. Many neighbors have purchased vacant properties through NORA's Lot Next Door program. Growing Home, a related program, allows purchasers to receive a $10,000 rebate in exchange for landscape improvements that incorporate storm water management. In New Orleans, most blighted properties are not boarded up, allowing for easy access, such as in the event of demolition.

New Orleans does not currently require absentee owners to register their properties via a vacant property registration ordinance, partly due to the problems associated with heirship and determining ownership. Ownership determinations can be complicated by the lack of a will or documentation of the legal transfer of a property. This also affects the code enforcement process, as the heirs of the last known owner must be located and notified of a code enforcement hearing involving their property. Determining the identity and contact information for these heirs requires considerable effort and causes significant delays. The legal systems required to document title and heirship adequately are inaccessible to many low-income, ethnic and racial minority homeowners, thus preventing intergenerational wealth accumulation and leaving many properties to fall into neglect.

As previously discussed, eminent domain, or expropriation in the language of Louisiana, has not been used since 2006 due to constitutional barriers. Other issues mentioned by interviewees were the expense and disposition of property. Other tools used in New Orleans include an online Blight Toolkit created for the Zion City neighborhood, the University of New Orleans-led WhoData.org community mapping project, and the Innovation Delivery Team, an approach used by New Orleans to meet top mayoral challenges with innovative, performance-driven solutions.

In New Orleans, certain policies and ordinances were reconfigured greatly to accommodate new strategies for combating blight. Most significantly, code enforcement ordinances were strengthened and the state passed superpriority lien enabling legislation, which allows enforcement of unpaid code enforcement fines through foreclosure by giving code liens priority over mortgages and other encumbrances. Other policy changes, such as greater enforcement of existing statutes and increased staffing in city departments, required only internal reconfigurations.

Funding for New Orleans strategies has come from HUD's Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) and Disaster Recovery CDBG, U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency Public Assistance grants for demolition, HUD's HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) funds, tax credit deals, the general millage, the local housing trust fund, philanthropic grants, property sales, and fees and fines.

Champions noted by interviewees included the mayor's administration, agencies such as NORA, think tanks like the Center of Community Progress and the Data Center, nonprofits such as Providence Community Housing and Harmony Neighborhood Development, and neighborhood organizations and activists. Interviewees frequently cited the importance of partnerships and indicated a list of at least 54 different individuals and organizations such as city and state agencies, nonprofits, neighborhood

organizations, foundations, and academia that were involved in blight remediation efforts, an overwhelming number of which were locally based in New Orleans. A common statement was that government cannot fix blight problems by itself, therefore, partnerships are crucial for success. The role of grassroots organizers in blight reduction was also highlighted as a strength in New Orleans.

One major challenge included the issues associated with clearing title and procuring title insurance on acquired properties, which requires significant research and is complicated by unclear or undocumented heirship of properties. Further, balancing safety, efficiency, affordability, and the need to preserve historic resources proved difficult. There were also issues with public trust in government, making the BlightSTAT meeting format invaluable for providing a public forum as well as educating the public about the city's intentions.

The public response to New Orleans' blight remediation activities thus far has been mixed. Some residents are pleased, while others have concerns about the allocation of resources. Concerns range from displeased neighbors who continue to live among blighted properties to those in wealthy areas who feel the resources are being unfairly distributed in distressed neighborhoods. However, BlightSTAT meetings and the 311 system provide a forum for citizen concerns, which has increased acceptance.

Unforeseen impacts have arisen, both positive and negative. Positive benefits have included additional public space and water management projects, and the engagement of the public. Negative impacts of note included greater gentrification near more desirable neighborhoods, displacement, lack of affordability, and the burden on impoverished homeowners who are legitimately unable to provide upkeep on their properties. Strict code enforcement may have the unintended consequence of abandonment where homeowners lack the resources to pay fines and repair costs. Abandonment has cascading effects on surrounding homes, leading to neighborhood destabilization rather than blight reduction. Several nonprofit organizations help disadvantaged homeowners with repairs, including Rebuilding Together New Orleans and Habitat for Humanity.

Macon Case Study

As in New Orleans, interviewees in Macon felt that the most significant cause of blight has been population decline in the city center. In terms of percentage change, the population loss of the central city area or the former Macon City (25 percent loss) has not been quite as significant as that of New Orleans (45 percent loss). From a peak city population of 122,423 in 1970, the former Macon City lost 31,072 residents while the now-consolidated Macon-Bibb County gained 12,129 residents during the same period. In many ways, the level and type of blight has been typical of midsized southeastern cities. Midcentury "white flight" to the suburbs caused concentrated poverty in the central city. More recently, interviewees felt that the aging housing stock and commercial disinvestment in the central city has faced competition from more modern, comfortable homes and businesses on larger lots in the suburbs. Although Macon's central business district is experiencing a revitalization such as commercial and loft development, the neighborhoods surrounding downtown are still languishing. Like New Orleans, Macon also lost industries and employment, including a Brown and Williamson cigarette plant and a Keebler bakery, while other businesses have downsized. In addition, the foreclosure crisis has led to greater

abandonment of properties. To improve political representation in government and in response to the shrinking population and tax base, Macon-Bibb County was consolidated on January 1, 2014. This was a significant event for the area, leading to renewed emphasis on blight remediation.

Figure 3: Population of the Former Macon City and Now-Consolidated Macon-Bibb County, 1900–2010
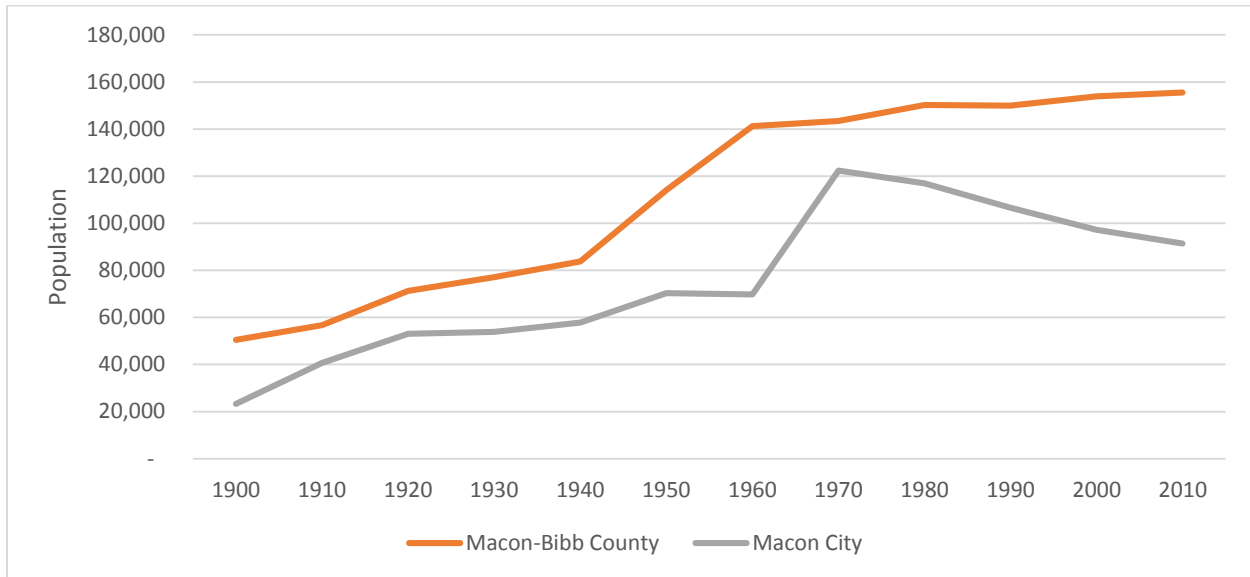
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census

Macon recently approved a $14 million bond dedicated to blight reduction. An Ad Hoc Committee of the Commission was formed to determine how to allocate $9 million of these funds, while $4 million was previously designated for projects in the Wise Avenue and Beall's Hill neighborhoods, and $1 million was designated for demolition and administrative costs. The Macon Action Plan, a downtown planning effort funded by the Knight Foundation and the Peyton Anderson Foundation, has engaged city agencies and community partners in plans to revitalize the historic core of Macon, including blighted neighborhoods such as East Macon, Pleasant Hill, and Beall's Hill.

Over time, Macon has utilized several vacant property census techniques such as LOVELAND Technologies' data system that allows residents to send blight alerts by text or "blext," as well as 311 notification, a See, Click, Fix web portal for reporting blight and other municipal service requests, and Listening Post Macon, another web portal that allows residents to offer feedback by tweet or text. The Ad Hoc Committee is currently evaluating these and other technologies to improve data collection.

Code enforcement, nuisance abatement, and demolitions in Macon operate somewhat differently from New Orleans, but they are equally robust and effective. After consolidation, the code enforcement division and building inspection departments of the two jurisdictions were merged, increasing the capacity for inspections, and a demolition coordinator was added. These staff members answer complaints and also generate their own workload by canvassing their assigned districts. Properties that receive a D or F on the property grading scale are prioritized as unsafe structures. A

notice of violation is issued, which can be followed by either property owner compliance or a court order nuisance abatement by Macon (such as debris removal). As of July 2015, a reinspection fee can be levied every 30 days in order to motivate action by the homeowner. If compliance is not achieved, the courts may authorize the Macon-Bibb department of community and economic development to demolish the structure. Few properties are acquired after demolition, but those that are acquired are typically scattered sites that are deemed to have redevelopment potential. Land banking exists in Macon through the well-established Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority, which assumes ownership of any acquired properties.

Cosmetic and safety improvement efforts include the Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful campaign, and two notable property improvement programs: Rebuilding Macon (formerly Christmas in April, a housing rehabilitation program for elderly or disabled homeowners) and the Five by Five block improvement program, which began as a targeted approach to cleaning and empowering selected five-block areas in a five-week time frame. Macon also utilizes rehabilitation of housing, a vacant property registration ordinance, and occasional eminent domain and tax foreclosures in its anti-blight campaign.

Policy and ordinance change has been relatively minor in Macon, reflecting the idea that enforcement and implementation of existing regulations can sometimes be more effective than creating new ones. Consolidation was by far the most dramatic policy change. Various refinements of the code included adoption of the International Property Maintenance Code, the additional notice of violation reinspection fee every 30 days a property is not mitigated, and the extension of city codes into the formerly unincorporated portions of the county. As noted previously, code enforcement and demolition policies have been extensively used, with a goal of 100 demolitions per year set by the current mayor. This goal was met in the fiscal year ending June 2014 and exceeded by 25 percent in the fiscal year ending June 2015.

Funding for the initial programs has come from CDBG, Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP), HOME funds, special-purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST), redevelopment subsidized through tax credits such as historic tax credits and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), FHA's 221(d)(4) mortgage insurance, and the general fund. More recently, a $14 million blight bond issue has been utilized. Although $9 million of the bond funds have been dedicated equally to each of the nine districts in Macon, much of the remaining funding has been awarded to two hard-hit neighborhoods (Beall's Hill and Wise Avenue) to leverage previous investments and build on momentum in these areas. The Blight Task Force has conducted extensive research, including trips to Flint and Detroit, Michigan, in order to determine the most appropriate strategies for eliminating blight.

As in New Orleans, partnerships have also been key to the success of Macon's anti-blight campaign. Champions of anti-blight activities in Macon have been numerous, including many public, private, nonprofit, and academic entities. Many pointed to the members of the Blight Task Force, particularly the mayor, assistant county manager, commissioners, Macon-Bibb Housing Authority, Macon Area Habitat for Humanity, and Austin Center for Community Development in the Village Green neighborhood. More unexpected champions were found in the local Macon *Telegraph* newspaper, which printed a blight exposé authored by the Mercer University Center for Collaborative Journalism ("The House Next Door"), and continued to raise awareness by cohosting a national "Unblight"

conference with the Sunlight Foundation. Other notable champions were the Center for Community Progress, the Knight Foundation, the Historic Macon Foundation, the participants in the One Macon! economic development strategic visioning process, the downtown improvement public-private partnership NewTown Macon, the Peyton Anderson Foundation, the leadership of Mercer University, the Macon Arts Alliance, and local neighborhood associations such as the Beall's Hill Neighborhood. Overall, collaboration has been a notable strength of the Macon program.

There have been several challenges in Macon, including the need to balance action and proper planning, which can be time-consuming. Data collection and analysis, including vacant property mapping, is under way, but there is much more to accomplish. Furthermore, there have been conflicts between those who believe that bond money should be evenly split among county commission districts and those who believe a targeted place-based approach would be more effective. Despite the bond issue, resources are still scarce to meet the needs of all residents. Through partnerships, volunteerism, and the leveraging of additional resources available in the area, much more can be accomplished. Legal issues were also noted as a challenge, including an overcautious interpretation of absentee property owners' rights.

As in New Orleans, the public response to Macon's blight remediation efforts has been mixed. Although many support the activities thus far, there have been a vocal number of residents who believe that local government is not doing enough, is not meeting the needs in their neighborhood, or are upset with their own code enforcement violation citations. Newspaper coverage and public education have helped to raise awareness and increase interest in blight. Although the Blight Task Force holds open meetings and attendees have been vocal about safety hazards in their neighborhoods, some interviewees would like to see greater attendance by the public. A few citizens have gone beyond existing city programs, notably Frank Austin of the aforementioned Austin Center for Community Development, who has led community garden and cleanup projects in the hard-hit Village Green neighborhood.

A significant positive impact of the Macon blight remediation work has been the increase in collaboration, characterized by less competition for resources between neighborhoods and other organizations. There have been a growing number of cleanup events as well. Unfortunately, the real estate market has not yet recovered in Macon, and high numbers of foreclosures and vacant demolished lots continue to have a negative impact on neighborhood stabilization.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many cities across the Southeast are faced with blighted properties. Developing a strategy for remediation can be difficult and challenging for a variety of reasons described in this paper, along with other complexities that may be unique to a particular location. The cities we studied, New Orleans and Macon, provide examples of innovative and effective approaches in several areas—underlying institutional infrastructure, local government agency structure and division of roles and responsibilities, the policy environment, and community outreach—that have potential for successful replication in

other parts of the region. The following list of recommendations comes from our analysis of interviews and literature. These are listed in no particular order of importance.

High-level strategy

- **Data collection and visualization is a critical component to addressing this issue**. A nonbiased, visual snapshot of blighted properties as defined by the jurisdiction can show the extent and concentration of the problem. A challenge like blight that has broad-reaching implications on neighborhood stabilization, character, and aesthetics warrants an accurate method of visual representation. Crowdsourced data and GIS databases are helpful for streamlining data collection and making information accessible to the public.
- **Understanding the depth and breadth of the issue should precede the development of a comprehensive strategy.** While pressure may exist from the community to develop and implement a plan quickly to address blight, the various agencies and organizations involved in the solution must fully understand the nature of the problem before taking action. Key considerations include creating definitions and categories for the degrees of blight present in the community and identifying neighborhood-level concentrations of blight. These basic data points should then inform the way various strategies and neighborhoods are prioritized in a plan.
- **Existence of an overarching, jurisdiction-wide blight strategy and implementation plan is of utmost importance** to ensure appropriate policy reforms, agency and organizational prioritization, and targeted funding allocation and requests. This type of plan should specify which government agencies and local organizations will be involved in the strategies put forth, which agency will have ownership of each particular strategy, and how the collective will define success under the plan.
- **Transparent and realistic metrics** help to benchmark the issue, determine successes and failures, and indicate points at which strategies should be refined and even recalibrated. The examples herein also suggest the need for a neutral convener (whether an agency or individual) that can use the data to highlight bright spots and areas for improvement.

Organizational operations

- **Leadership is key.** Having strong visionary and implementation experts at the helm and throughout the various agencies and organizations involved is a surefire way to prioritize this issue and ensure adequate resource allocation for the various approaches that are being pursued. Examples from the locations profiled suggest that having attention on this issue from the mayoral administration is important in focusing the public discourse and subsequently, directing resources to the challenges at hand.
- **Involving technical experts with unbiased perspectives has a role in informing and guiding decision making.** While leadership among elected officials is an important aspect for setting the municipal vision and galvanizing the public, interviewees indicated the importance of having one or more people guiding the policy and budget process and prioritization. These experts should

be unencumbered from voters' interests and seek data-driven decisions that minimize political and emotional pressures.

- **Local government should prioritize hiring and retaining professional staff across involved agencies**. This may mean taking a close look at the current balance of staffing to ensure there is sufficient real estate, code enforcement, legal, and other necessary knowledge and experience across the agencies and any interagency working groups.

- **Strategic partnerships can leverage political will and funding streams.** An issue like blight that involves multiple jurisdictional agencies and has far-reaching community-wide effects is not one that can be solved by a singular entity. Public-private partnerships are borne out of necessity in attempting to expand the effort across more neighborhoods, and even individual residents can support the process through information collection and feedback. Macon's mayor has a relevant tagline that emphasizes the community's role under his governance style: "You can do it. We can help."

- **Program prioritization should follow neighborhood need**, rather than political interests. Strategically allocating program funding and staff to address high-priority areas will lead to solutions that ultimately benefit the greater community. Education of elected officials by agency heads and community organizations is important in building momentum around priority areas. Another approach is to include flexibility in funding allocation so that neighborhood prioritization can happen in the future through redistribution of resources.

Policy and legal systems

- **State legislation and local ordinances (particularly those that may be overly deferential to property owners) can be a barrier** to successful and expedient remedies for blight challenges. While southeastern states have varying levels of municipal self-government, based on state constitutions and statutes, those that offer more property rights protections tend to present difficulties for local governments seeking to return blighted properties to the market, while minimizing the time period and government expense involved. For example, state constitutional amendments that limit eminent domain and enable superpriority liens have respectively complicated and facilitated blight remediation. Additionally, Georgia and other states that received aid through the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Hardest Hit Fund may request approval to reprogram these funds for blight reduction, which has been successfully demonstrated in Michigan.

- **Code enforcement can be an effective tool in this effort.** Both New Orleans and Macon have significantly enhanced their code enforcement divisions by reorganizing agencies and adding additional staff members and expertise. In the case of New Orleans, moving the department from one organizational division to another gave blight remediation work prominence and visibility.

- **Codes may need revamping in the language and enforcement procedures**. Housing and building codes warrant a close look to determine whether the language is current and effective in addressing the local blight situation. The procedures by which code enforcement is conducted and the ways in which the process is funded (including fee structures for violations) also deserve

attention. A municipality may need a partial or complete overhaul of the code enforcement process to streamline processes, create logical handoffs between the various departments involved, and determine the right balance in program efficiency and thorough parcel review.

- **The expropriation or eminent domain option is, in most cases, a more complex and costly option** to addressing these properties. Though this may appear a quicker option at face value to minimize litigious ownership battles, these types of cases are often encumbered by procedural hurdles. For this reason, the approach is not used frequently in New Orleans or Macon.
- **Land banking can be used as a conduit for revitalization.** While a formal land bank may not be necessary, as evidenced in New Orleans, communities with land banking capabilities are able to provide services to acquire, abate, and return properties to active use. This includes forgiveness of tax debt on a property.

Public participation

- **Local residents should have easy entry points** (both through public-facing data management systems and regular meetings) to understand the issues and solutions put forth by involved agencies and organizations and to voice suggestions about the process. Based on interview feedback, successful public participation processes included transparent information sharing, a variety of visual and nonvisual communication tools, appropriate outreach strategies to solicit community involvement, and feedback mechanisms to report back to the community any actions that were taken as a result of community recommendations.
- **Pictorial and infographic representations of the process** for bringing a blighted property back on the market may help residents better understand an often complex process. As part of its public outreach campaign, New Orleans developed the decision tree described in the case study. Interviewees noted that it serves not only as a good public communication device, but it also acts as an internal training tool and reference for the process in shorthand form. The city of New Orleans also incorporated a refreshingly user-friendly web page that describes the various steps in the process as well as the role of the city and the public, using thumbnail graphics and accessible text.
- **Public critique of the overarching plan or singular strategies can be a benefit,** rather than a downside, of open public conversation. While several interviewees acknowledged that solutions will never be fast enough for residents living next to or near blighted properties, they also said this type of public attention and feedback helped fine-tune their approaches almost in real time, and certainly faster than the data system updates and other information-gathering efforts may allow.
- **Formalized neighborhood groups are logical community entities that can represent residents' perspectives on the issues.** Neighborhood-level organizations play an important role in compiling residents' interests and bringing them to the appropriate conversations. Groups like neighborhood watch groups, community coalitions, neighborhood associations, and other similar groups may have an established rapport among their constituents that allows them access to honest feedback at the grassroots level.

Interviewees commonly referred to the work of the national Center for Community Progress, including its technical assistance capabilities, and other organizations to link experts with peers from other cities and provide an inventory of approaches that are being pursued. In some ways, this comment marries well with the perspective of interviewees who noted that anti-blight work, like much of community and economic development, benefits from infusion of fresh thinking from other areas. In fact, the work in New Orleans and Macon was propelled by many practitioners and policymakers who relocated to those communities from other areas and drew on those experiences in shaping their own local work. In addition, Macon's Blight Task Force was able to learn from the examples of Flint and Detroit, Michigan, through a travel fellowship grant provided by the Knight Foundation.

Our methodology and subsequent analysis and recommendations were designed to address questions and considerations facing practitioners and policymakers addressing blight in the Southeast. There may be nuances and even semantic differences in other regions that a reader should keep in mind when searching for ideas that may work elsewhere. However, the stories of New Orleans and Macon hold lessons that should resonate with local leaders developing and implementing anti-blight plans across the country.

We have focused on two examples from the Southeast. There are many areas for future research, including how blight remediation strategies are coupled with long-term affordability approaches, and how local governments can be innovators on this issue, with solutions that span policy, process, and organizational structure.

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