

**Calhoun County
Land Bank
Authority**

Strategic Plan for 2014 - 2017

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Progress

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Executive Summary

The Calhoun County Land Bank Authority (CCLBA) is a quasi-governmental entity that was formed in 2006 under Public Act 258 of 2003 in order to assist in the effort to return vacant and abandoned properties to productive use within Calhoun County, Michigan. In order to do so, CCLBA works cooperatively with local units of government, non-profit organizations and other community partners to effectively create opportunities for blight elimination, economic development and community revitalization. CCLBA established acquisition, maintenance, property reuse, and disposition programs to addresses the over 700 properties currently in its inventory.

In early 2014, CCLBA engaged the Center for Community Progress to facilitate a strategic planning process to help prioritize and plan its future work aimed at catalyzing community and economic development in Calhoun County. During the strategic planning process, Community Progress conducted a series of external stakeholder meetings that engaged representatives from local government, nonprofit and for profit organizations, funders, and elected county officials. During these meetings, stakeholders received educational background on land banks in Michigan and CCLBA activities and provided feedback on ways that CCLBA can increase its impact on Calhoun County. Following the external stakeholder engagement, CCLBA's Board of Directors and staff reviewed the external feedback and discussed priorities for CCLBA's work. As a result of the external and internal strategic planning discussions, CCLBA's Board and staff identified the following programmatic, operational, fund, and Board development goals that will guide their revitalization efforts in Calhoun County over the next three years.

Strategic Plan Goal

Over the next three years, CCLBA will reduce the number of blighted properties in Calhoun County in an effort to put property back into productive use.

Programmatic Goals

- Be a vital partner in at least one (1) economic development project
- Promote and support the rehabilitation of ten (10) residential units
- Demolish 150 properties
- Transition 350 properties from land bank ownership to productive reuse

Operational Goals

- Strengthen CCLBA's operational infrastructure
- Expand CCLBA staff capacity and support
- Increase the public's knowledge of CCLBA's purpose and role, past accomplishments, and current activities
- Reduce the operational maintenance costs associated with unsold inventory by 50%

Fund Development

- Expand the level of funding for future programmatic activity while diversifying funding sources

Board Development

- Continue to build Board member expertise on land banking and key vacant property issues
- Increase the level of public Board member advocacy for CCLBA's work with partner organizations, funders, and local and state officials

Introduction

The combination of the mortgage crisis, the collapse of housing values, and continued sluggish state and national economy led to a wave of property abandonment and disinvestment across the state. Calhoun County is no exception. The county is estimated to have 7,700 vacant housing units, up 1,100 from 2000.¹ Tax foreclosures in Calhoun County nearly tripled from 2006 to 2011.²

Abandoned and vacant properties breed disinvestment, drain funds from the local property tax base, decay the social fabric, and contribute to economic decline. Despite the considerable cost of vacant and abandoned properties, they present a tremendous opportunity, if properly leveraged. Vacant properties can be used to attract investment and redevelopment and can be transformed through alternative site treatments to improve quality of life for residents and businesses.

In order to capitalize on the opportunity that vacant properties present and stymie the trend of decline and abandonment in the county, there must be a coordinated and effective approach to vacant property acquisition, maintenance, disposition, and reuse. The Calhoun County Land Bank Authority exists to fill that need.

Facing a growing challenge of increasing inventory and limited resources, CCLBA must develop clear priorities and goals to ensure the organization can effectively implement its work. To that end, CCLBA initiated a process to craft a framework that will guide its decision making on a programmatic and operational level. The resulting strategic plan is intended to set a clear vision for the organization's activities over the next three years.

¹ 2012 American Communities Survey (5-year estimate) and 2010 Decennial Census

² Michigan Department of Treasury. (2014). State-Wide Real Property Tax Forfeiture and Foreclosure Statistics. Prepared by Property Services Division utilizing data provided by county treasurers.

Organization Overview

Mission and Vision

Calhoun County Land Bank Authority's mission is to support local neighborhood and business district revitalization by acquiring, holding, and disposing of blighted or abandoned properties within Calhoun County.

Long term, CCLBA hopes to improve housing values and overall market conditions through a reduction in the number of publically owned properties and tax foreclosures, removal of blighted properties, and creation of additional economic development opportunities.

History

In 2006, the Calhoun County Treasurer and Board of Commissioners, through an intergovernmental agreement with the Michigan State Land Bank Fast Track Authority, established the Calhoun County Land Bank Authority (CCLBA) to combat the rising number of foreclosures and blighted properties in the county. At that time, CCLBA served as the repository for unwanted tax foreclosed properties, and facilitated some blight removal. From 2006-2010, CCLBA was composed of shared staff from the Calhoun County Treasurer's office. During this time period, CCLBA operated acquisition, maintenance, side lot disposition, and garden lease programs.

In 2010, the role and responsibilities of CCLBA drastically changed when CCLBA received a \$3 million Neighborhood Stabilization Program II (NSP II) grant from the Michigan NSP II Consortium through the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. CCLBA used these funds in partnership with the City of Battle Creek's \$5 million allocation for neighborhood stabilization activities including targeted demolition and residential development activities on properties located in the City of Battle Creek. CCLBA became responsible for providing the due diligence associated with all NSP II properties including acquisition, holding, rehabilitation, demolition, marketing, and disposition.

2013 brought key leadership changes at CCLBA with the election of a new County Treasurer who serves as CCLBA's Board Chair and the hiring of the organization's first Executive Director dedicated to CCLBA operations. Since this time, the organization initiated a process to determine what needs exist in Calhoun County, how the CCLBA could best address those needs, and what capacity enhancements are required to serve residents.

Organizational Structure

CCLBA Board of Directors serves as the governing body of CCLBA and has general charge of the affairs, property and assets of CCLBA. CCLBA Board of Directors determines the policies,

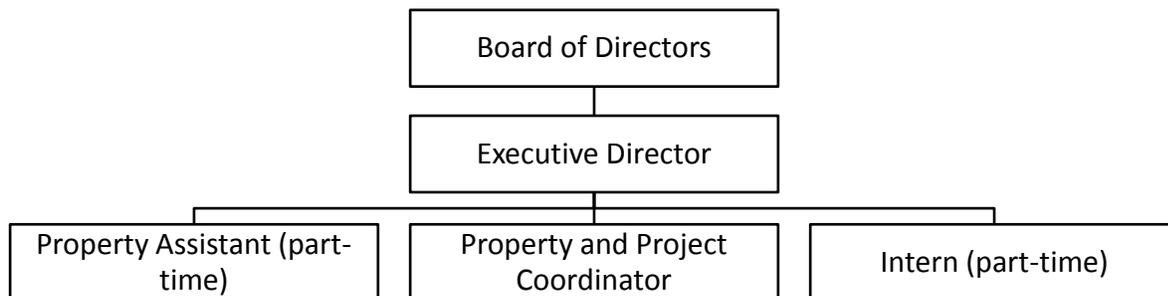
purposes and objectives, and to this end, manages and controls all of CCLBA’s property, assets and disbursement of funds. According to the by-laws adopted by CCLBA, the Board of Directors is comprised of the Calhoun County Treasurer, one representative from the City of Battle Creek, one representative from the City of Albion, one member of the Calhoun County Board of Commissioners, one representative from a township located in Calhoun County and two representatives from Calhoun County at large appointed by the County Board of Commissioners.

The following is a list of current serving Board Members:

- County Treasurer: Christine Schauer, Chair
- Township representative: Rob Behnke, Pennfield Township Supervisor
- Albion representative: Peggy Sindt, Director of Albion Economic Development Authority
- Board of Commissioners: Terris Todd, Calhoun County Commissioner
- Battle Creek representative: Lynn Ward Gray, City of Battle Creek Commissioner
- At-large representative: Jeremy Andrews, Sprout Urban Farms
- At-large representative: Nola Batch, Realtor

The day-to-day operations of CCLBA are carried out by staff members. These responsibilities include but are not limited to managing property inventory, administering programs, overseeing grants and special projects, and identifying and cultivating partnerships within the County. The CCLBA is staffed by an Executive Director, Property and Project Coordinator, a part time Property Assistant, and from time to time an Intern.

Organizational Structure Chart



Programs and Accomplishments

The CCLBA established the following programs to address the needs associated with vacant and abandoned property in Calhoun County. Each program operates based on the policies and procedures adopted by CCLBA Board of Directors.

Acquisition of Real Property Program

The ‘Acquisition of Real Property’ program allows CCLBA to acquire properties located within Calhoun County which meet the criteria established in the policies and procedures adopted by

CCLBA Board of Directors. The sources of real property inventory of CCLBA include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) tax foreclosed transfers from the State of Michigan, Calhoun County, or local government units; (b) donations from private persons and entities; (c) market purchases; (d) land banking transfers contemplating the simultaneous acquisition and disposition of property. In determining the nature and extent of properties to be acquired, CCLBA will also give consideration to criteria including, but not limited to, the underlying values of the subject properties, the financial resources available for acquisitions, and the operational capacity of CCLBA.

Accomplishments:

- CCLBA has acquired approximately ten (10) properties through bank donation, sixty (60) through traditional purchase, and several hundred through tax foreclosure through this program since inception.

Property Disposition Program

The 'Property Disposition' program provides CCLBA with an opportunity to place properties back into productive use. This program gives consideration to the impact of a property transfer on short and long-term neighborhood and community development plans. This program prioritizes the property use and transferee to achieve the highest and best use of the property based on mission and vision of CCLBA in partnership with the local unit of government's land use goals.

Accomplishments:

- CCLBA has disposed of approximately 300 properties through this program since inception.
- The Land Bank is currently exploring a partnership with the local Supportive Housing Council to provide housing for a "Housing First" program to address local homelessness. The Land Bank connected with this organization via the City of Battle Creek, and worked with City staff to identify target areas for the projects. To date, they have identified potential five structures for use in this program.

Side-Lot Program

The 'Side-lot' program is designed to provide adjacent and neighboring property owners with the opportunity to purchase, at a significantly discounted consideration, residential vacant, unimproved parcels of insufficient size to permit independent development, owned by CCLBA. This program allows property owners to expand and improve their own property, puts parcels back on the active tax roll, and reduces maintenance costs for CCLBA.

Accomplishments:

- CCLBA has disposed of approximately 75 properties through this program since inception.

Garden Lease Program

Since CCLBA's creation, they have offered a local 'Garden Lease' program. In this program, vacant parcels are used by local organization for urban gardening activities. This program provides healthy produce to residents, as well as economic development activities through the sale of produce to local vendors. Beyond the self-evident positive outcome of this program, it reduces the maintenance costs to CCLBA and provides a benefit to the streetscape through a green alternative use.

Accomplishments:

- CCLBA has leased four (4) properties through this program since inception.
- After the completion of an NSP2 funded demolition, the CCLBA leased property to Sprout Urban Farms to create Bright Star Farms. This project resulted in neighborhood investment, public participation, and fresh produce for residents.

Land Banking Program

The 'Land Banking' program provides an opportunity for CCLBA to acquire real property for or on behalf of a governmental entity or nonprofit corporation to (a) permit the redevelopment and reuse of vacant, abandoned, foreclosed or other properties, (b) support targeted efforts to stabilize neighborhoods, stimulate residential, commercial or industrial development, and (c) hold parcels of land for future strategic governmental purposes.

Accomplishments:

- CCLBA has land banked 85 properties through this program since inception.
- CCLBA currently has land banking agreements with Battle Creek Unlimited, Neighborhoods Incorporated of Battle Creek, and Proactis to hold several properties scattered throughout Battle Creek and Albion for future development.

Other Activities

In addition to the more formalized programs stated above, CCLBA partners on a number of different blight removal and rehabilitation projects. These activities typically cross a number of programs such as acquisition of real property, land banking and disposition.

Accomplishments:

- CCLBA demolished 300 properties since 2007, the majority of which occurred in Battle Creek funded with NSP II
- CCLBA assisted with the rehabilitation of over 35 single family homes in Battle Creek, funded with NSP II
- CCLBA partnered with Habitat for Humanity to complete a volunteer driven vacant property board-up project
- CCLBA partnered with the Community Action Agency (CA) on "Project Renew" in which they acquired and held a property, while it was redeveloped by CA. It was then sold to

an owner occupant and both CA and CCLBA retained a percentage of the profits from sale.

- CCLBA acquired a tax foreclosed property in Albion and then partnered with St. Paul Lutheran church to create a much needed daycare center in the City.

Partnerships

To increase its effectiveness and impact, CCLBA activated numerous partnerships with local units of government and nonprofit organizations. These partnerships span many of CCLBA's programs and provide an opportunity for local involvement in activities such as strategic acquisitions and demolitions, rehabilitation, economic development, planning, land banking, urban gardening and beautification, and blight removal. The following list details CCLBA partners and activities they partnered on:

- Calhoun County Treasurer: strategic acquisitions and demolitions, and grant opportunities
- City of Battle Creek: rehabilitation and strategic demolition grant opportunities, strategic property acquisition and disposition, other grant opportunities, e.g. Target Market Analysis, and long-term planning discussions
- City of Albion: blight removal grant opportunities and strategic demolitions, Target Market Analysis
- Pennfield Township: blight removal
- Community Action Agency (CA): housing rehabilitation and planning
- Habitat for Humanity: decorative boarding project
- Neighborhood Inc. of Battle Creek (NIBC): land banking and strategic demolition
- Battle Creek Unlimited (BCU): economic development
- Proactis: economic development
- Sprout Urban Farms: urban gardening and beautification
- Fremont Tomato Heads: urban gardening and beautification
- Department of Environmental Quality: remediation of environmental contamination
- Michigan State Housing Development Authority: grant opportunities

Strategic Planning Process

For an organization to determine what programs and services it should provide and the corresponding capacities it needs to deliver those programs and services successfully, it must have a clear vision for what the organization is trying to accomplish in the future and an understanding of the external factors that may impact their work. Strategic planning plays a critical role in providing an organization that framework and direction for decision-making. Recognizing the importance of having a clear vision and guide for future decision-making, CCLBA initiated a strategic planning process in early 2014.

Process and Participants

The central component of the 2014 strategic planning process spanned a two day event, facilitated by the Center for Community Progress, on February 25th and 26th. In this two day event, multiple internal and external stakeholders were engaged in discussions about the challenges facing Calhoun County, the past activities of CCLBA, and the future direction of the land bank.

External engagement

CCLBA's leadership determined that external engagement was imperative for the development of meaningful future goals and priorities. To that end, CCLBA identified a variety of stakeholder groups to participate in the strategic planning process. To gather in-depth feedback, CCLBA chose to split those stakeholder groups up into three different engagement sessions which allowed for maximum discussion time with each set of stakeholders. These sessions included one for local government unit representatives, one for county elected officials and administrative representatives, and one for nonprofit, economic development, philanthropic, and financial institution representatives.

Since each stakeholder group had varying levels of knowledge regarding land banking in Michigan and CCLBA activities, each engagement session began with an educational overview of land bank history, powers, governance, and operation followed by a presentation on CCLBA's work and accomplishments to date. These presentations and question and answer periods provided a grounding for subsequent feedback sessions on future CCLBA work.

Following the educational overview, the engagement session transitioned into a facilitated feedback period. The facilitated feedback sessions focused on the following key questions:

- What challenges do vacant properties pose to your work?
- What is the single most important change that needs to happen in order to improve life in Calhoun County?
- Based on today's presentations, has anything changed in your understanding of land banks or CCLBA's work?

- Based on your work with or your knowledge of CCLBA, what have they done that has ‘worked’ or has positively impacted your community? What have they tried that hasn’t worked well? Why?
- In the future, what programs should CCLBA work to implement in order to impact quality of life? Which of those is most critical? What is the biggest threat to successful implementation? Who must CCLBA work with in order to successfully implement those?
- For properties that need demolition, how do you think CCLBA should prioritize demolition? For properties that will be held by CCLBA where there is no immediate reuse option, what do you think should be done with those properties on an interim basis? For properties that can be sold, how do you think CCLBA should prioritize those sales?

Community Progress facilitated and collected notes on each feedback session. A summary of the external feedback is provided in Appendix A.

The following individual stakeholders participated in CCLBA’s strategic planning external engagement process:

- Paul Anderson, Emmett Township
- Jeremy Andrews, Sprout Farms
- Mercedes Angus, City of Springfield
- Cheryl Beard, Battle Creek Unlimited
- Erv Brinker, Summit Pointe
- Ann Chapman, Battle Creek Community Foundation
- Natalie Dean, City of Marshall
- Steve Frisbie, Calhoun County Commissioner
- Nathan Henne, City of Springfield
- Christine Hilton, City of Battle Creek
- Mike Hindenach, Marshall Area of Economic Development Alliance
- Benda Hunt, Battle Creek Community Foundation
- Scott Hutchinson, Family Health Center
- Art Kale, Calhoun County Commissioner
- Derek King, Calhoun County Commissioner
- Joe Konrad, Habitat for Humanity
- Christine Kosmowski, Water Resources Commission
- Richard Lindsey, CCLBA General Counsel, Calhoun County Corporation Counsel
- Chris Lussier, City of Battle Creek
- Paul Makoski, Calhoun County Health Department
- James Powell, Senior Millage Allocation Committee
- Matt Saxton, Calhoun County Sheriff
- Peggy Sindt, Albion Economic Development Corporation
- Tom Sprau, Bedford Township
- Lee Talmage, Battle Creek Housing Commission
- Debra Taylor, Village of Tekonsha
- Mary Ann Taylor, Neighborhoods Inc. of Battle Creek

- Brent Thelen, County GIS
- John Tracy, City of Albion
- Amy Rose Wallace-Simpson, Community Action Agency
- John Wright, Fremont Tomato Heads
- Katherine Yates, Chemical Bank

Internal engagement

Once all of the external engagement sessions were completed, CCLBA staff, Board members, and legal counsel met to review external feedback and discuss the future direction of CCLBA. Community Progress provided an overview of the major themes and points of feedback gathered from the external engagement sessions. Following that, Community Progress guided a discussion on visioning, programmatic and operational goal setting. In addition, participants developed goals for the organization, assigned priorities for those goals, and brainstormed strategies and actions for successful implementation. The information gathered during the internal engagement session formed the basis for the strategic plan document drafted by Center for Community Progress.

Strategic Plan Goals and Activities

Strategic Plan Goal

Over the next three years, CCLBA will reduce the number of blighted properties in Calhoun County in an effort to put property back into productive use. To achieve this goal, CCLBA set programmatic, operational, fund development, and board development objectives and activities, detailed below.

Programmatic Goals Over a Three Year Period

Be a vital partner in at least one (1) economic development project

Activities:

- Develop and share an outreach presentation or materials on CCLBA's economic development priorities and development tools (e.g. land assembly, Brownfield, Bond Financing, expedited quiet title, federal funding, etc.) with local governments, nonprofit and for-profit stakeholders
- Identify economic development plans or priorities for each city, township, and village located within Calhoun County to determine how the tools of the land banks can best be utilized to support economic development activities
- Build or strengthen partnerships with potential economic development partners like the local Economic Development Corporations, Brownfield Redevelopment Authorities, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and educational institutions
- Once an economic development opportunity is identified, utilize the current CCLBA land banking program to permit the redevelopment and reuse of vacant, abandoned, foreclosed or other properties

Promote and support the rehabilitation of thirty (30) residential units

Activities:

- Work with local units to create a housing rehabilitation strategy that will lay out geographic and site priorities for housing rehabilitation
- Implement an outreach program specifically aimed at attracting for-profit developers for purposes of partner or leading rehabilitation projects
- Increase the knowledge and attract additional interest of realtors to assist with the sale of CCLBA properties for rehabilitation through the issuance of a Request for Qualification
- Work with the County Treasurer to institute a routinized system for (1) sharing information about available tax foreclosed properties with local units and partner organizations and (2) obtaining control of those properties via right of first refusal or bundling for rehabilitation purposes
- Increase the number of rehabilitation projects completed in partnership with CA

- Explore alternative disposition programs, like a deed in escrow program, that would allow for an individual owner to participate in the rehabilitation of a property
- Explore the feasibility of alternative financing programs (e.g. land contracts or lease-to-purchase) that will allow residents with limited access to traditional financing sources to occupy a house with the goal of gaining future ownership
- Identify and attract state, local and other grant or financing opportunities that incentivize housing development and residential rehabilitation
- Explore the possibility of providing CCLBA financing to support rehabilitation activities where traditional financing sources are inaccessible

Demolish 150 blighted properties

Activities:

- Work with local units to create a demolition strategy that will lay out geographic and site priorities for demolition
- Identify and attract state, local and other grant or financing opportunities that support demolition activities
- Explore and secure additional opportunities to leverage demolition funding from local government entities, nonprofit organizations, corporations, and foundations who can support the demolition of vacant, blighted and problem properties in Calhoun County
- Improve upon the current systems, timing, and capacity of CCLBA to efficiently and effectively expand the demolition program
- Create an outreach strategy for the demolition program that will benefit both local government entities and members of the community
- Explore the potential utility of deconstruction techniques as a source of workforce development and resale revenue

Transition 300 properties from land bank ownership to productive reuse

Activities:

- Proactively reach out to eligible side lot transferees about the availability of the side lot program yearly
- Develop and distribute clear, user-friendly materials on how residents or organizations can acquire properties from CCLBA
- Work with existing or new partners to expand the number of sites that are sold for gardening or other green reuse
- Provide an online portal where the general public and organizations can view available CCLBA properties and inquire about or apply for purchase of CCLBA property
- Assess proximity of inventory to key non-profit institutions or for profit firms and proactively reach out to those entities to provide them an opportunity for acquisition and site expansion
- Target outreach to local units of government, nonprofit organizations, local institutions (e.g. educational or health care), Chambers of Commerce, or existing firms to inform them of CCLBA properties available for sale in their respective areas and utilize their networks to market the available property

Operational Goals

Strengthen CCLBA's operational infrastructure

Activities:

- Adopt policies and procedures for all of CCLBA's programs that guide the decision making of CCLBA's Board of Directors and staff and review them on an annual basis
- Complete a strategic planning process that will provide a framework for decision-making for the next three years and reassess the plan's goals each year
- Operationalize CCLBA's demolition and rehabilitation activity through the creation of policies and procedures specifically for a demolition and rehabilitation program that align with the acquisition and disposition policies, priorities, and procedures previously adopted by CCLBA
- Review, update, or create internal organizational policies (e.g. employee handbook, financial control policies, or ethics policy) Evaluate the meeting frequency of the Board of Directors to determine if it fits the ongoing needs of CCLBA
- Develop an accurate picture of CCLBA inventory through expanded and timely data collection

Expand CCLBA staff capacity and support

Activities:

- Determine whether future staff will be hired as CCLBA employees or leased employees of Calhoun County
- Fill immediate staffing needs, specifically, hire a property manager to handle the day to day operations of CCLBA and a part-time administrative assistant
- Assess future staffing needs based on program development and develop a phased staffing plan
- Seek opportunities for added staffing capacity at a reduced cost through programs like AmeriCorps
- Provide staff with technical development opportunities to increase their knowledge of land banking best practices or innovations and professional development opportunities to grow their management and leadership skillsets
- Create an Advisory Council that would offer staff additional perspectives and advice as they implement CCLBA activities and new programs

Increase the public's knowledge of CCLBA's purpose and role, past accomplishments, and current activities

Activities:

- Develop a website that promotes CCLBA's history, programs, past accomplishments, and current projects
- Develop simple, attractive marketing collateral that publicizes the CCLBA which staff, Board members, and partners can distribute

- Gather statistics about the amount of vacant, blighted, or tax foreclosed property in the County or local units and share publically in presentations or materials when discussing the need for CCLBA's work
- Schedule individual outreach meetings with each local municipality (including community development officers, supervisor, assessor, clerks, other leadership, land use departments, etc.) to share information about CCLBA and partnership opportunities
- Develop and publically distribute an annual report each year
- Consider hosting an annual event to coincide with the release of the annual report that will provide key stakeholders with an update of the accomplishments throughout the year and provide an look ahead to the next year's goals
- Identify other established communication channels like community newsletters, blogs, or websites that would provide an opportunity to publicize CCLBA information
- Issue press releases when a notable project, partnership or goal has been initiated or completed
- Provide representatives from each local unit of government (e.g. elected officials, departments) with a '101-level' presentation about the CCLBA that they can then share when they are discussing CCLBA with their local partners or constituents
- Consider contracting with a public relations consultant to help develop materials and approaches to making the communication program concise and specific

Reduce the operational maintenance costs associated with unsold inventory by 50%

Activities:

- Work with local units to identify maintenance priorities in their communities (e.g. major thoroughfares) and realign maintenance frequency and style accordingly
- Pilot new applications of lot treatments that are less costly to maintain like clover, wildflowers, mow strips etc.
- Require the use of low maintenance plantings (e.g. clover) for demolition sites in the demolition specifications, where funding reoccurring maintenance is not feasible
- Establish a program that would coordinate community-based work, volunteer or contracted, to maintain CCLBA properties (e.g. Genesee County's Clean and Green Program) in a more cost-effective manner
- Identify and implement opportunities to partner with county and/or local government departments to provide property maintenance (e.g. Michigan Youth Challenge Academy or a prisoner re-entry program)
- Consider offering an adopt-a-lot program to adjacent businesses, institutions, governments, or homeowners who would like to maintain nearby CCLBA lots

Fund Development Goals

Expand the level of funding for future programmatic activity while diversifying funding sources

Activities:

- Develop a three-year budget based on the program needs set forth by the strategic plan goals
- Consider the creation of a fund development committee that consists of staff, Board Members, and representatives who can connect CCLBA staff with funding and support opportunities
- Ensure that the five year, fifty percent tax capture is being collected from local units
- Continue to work with the Calhoun County Treasurer to enter into agreement(s) with the Treasurer to transfer funds from the Delinquent Tax Fund to reimburse the Land Bank for activities and expenses associated with tax foreclosed properties
- Obtain or partner with a local unit of government to obtain non-entitlement CDBG funding for demolition from Michigan State Housing Development Authority
- Obtain or partner with a local unit of government to obtain NSP II program income from Michigan State Housing Development Authority
- Identify and secure grant funding from at least two (2) new sources
- Seek specific grant opportunities to increase the capacity of the organization, such as technology grants.
- Maximize potential of 'fee for service' in areas of CCLBA expertise (i.e. quiet title actions, legal, etc.)

Board Development Goals

Continue to build Board member expertise on land banking and key vacant property issues

Activities:

- Create a calendar of training opportunities for Board members that includes local and statewide training on land banking
- Consider implementing a requirement for Board Members to attend at least one event per year
- Ensure a budget line-item exists for Board Members to attend training sessions
- Consider incorporating mini trainings or 'ten minutes of learning' at each board meeting led by staff, Board members or external partners
- Enlist local experts to conduct trainings on local trends and industry-related topics
- Distribute relevant materials and articles on the industry to all Board Members in Board correspondences from CCLBA

Increase the level of public Board member advocacy for CCLBA’s work with partner organizations, funders, and local and state officials

Activities:

- Ensure all Board members have a clear understanding of the direction of CCLBA and can deliver an accurate “elevator speech” about CCLBA
- Provide Board members with talking points on key issues and collateral material on CCLBA
- Have each Board member reach out to at least two new potential funder or partner organization in their network each year to expand the level of interest and knowledge of CCLBA
- Utilize Board members to brainstorm new funding opportunities and potential partners that may support the financial needs of CCLBA
- Secure opportunities for Board members to support CCLBA through public channels like letters to the editor and public comment periods in local meetings

Conclusion

The strategic plan set forth by Calhoun County Land Bank Authority's Board and staff will provide a framework to guide programmatic, operational, fund, and Board decision-making over the next three years. It will also provide a structure for accountability and evaluation. In order to make certain that the strategic plan serves as a tool for decision-making, accountability and evaluation, it is imperative that CCLBA's staff and Board reexamine the goals and activities in the plan as the external and internal landscape changes. The strategic plan is intended to be a living document and must continue to evolve to ensure its utility.

Appendix A: External Feedback

As a central component of the 2014 strategic planning process, CCLBA solicited feedback from a variety of external stakeholder groups through multiple engagement sessions. During these sessions, Community Progress gathered feedback from stakeholders regarding the challenges in Calhoun County related to vacant property, past and current work of CCLBA, and future ways CCLBA can play a role in improving the quality of life for residents in Calhoun County.

Overview of feedback

In the past, there appeared to be a strong disconnect between CCLBA, local units, nonprofit organizations and other stakeholders. There was a sense that the land bank was simply a “black hole” where properties ended up and were not moving back into productive use. Participants felt that the past CCLBA administration made decisions with little to no concern about how those decisions would impact the local units of government because the focus was only on benefiting the land bank. This has led to a lingering lack of trust among local units of government and the land bank.

Beyond the lack of trust, there is also just a lack of knowledge of the land bank’s programs and powers. All of the participants agreed that the presentation completed by CCLBA as part of the educational sessions was extremely beneficial and recommended that they continue to do a session like that annually. The most significant disconnect was between the smaller cities and townships.

Amongst all of the stakeholder sessions, it was generally agreed that CCLBA is moving in a positive direction. The new Treasurer is seen as a positive for CCLBA, and communication and the will to help the local units is evident. As well, participants appreciate the work and diligence of the new Executive Director. While promotion of the accomplishments in the community is lacking, it was noted that it has been improving and that people are beginning to view CCLBA differently. Many participants, who were least familiar with CCLBA and its potential, left the outreach sessions excited at the future potential.

When asked about what CCLBA should become in the future, one of the participants stated quite simply, “We need them to continue doing what they are doing, but more of it.” It appears that all participants desire CCLBA to work in partnership with other localities and organizations in Calhoun County to realize their land use goals. This will be accomplished by strong communication and education protocols, partnerships, a strong county-wide demolition program, and the disposition of properties to bring them back into productive use.

The following subsections provide additional detail on the external feedback gathered in the engagement sessions.

Current Challenges in Calhoun County

Defining Vacant Property

During the stakeholder meetings, there was agreement among the focus group participants that vacant property has become a larger issue in Calhoun County over the last several years. When asked how they would define “vacant property” external stakeholders provided a variety of answers, however a common theme emerged – the lack of occupancy or structure is not the primary factor, but rather the negative impact of that property on the community. The bulleted list below summarizes the ways stakeholders defined vacant property:

- Unoccupied property that negatively impacts the surrounding area from a property value or quality of life standpoint
- Properties with no legal ownership
- Property that is not on the tax rolls
- Property that is blighted, burned or an eyesore
- Property that is in some way obsolete or not habitable
- Unbuildable vacant lots
- Property that attracts illegal dumping
- Re-occurring blight that keeps coming back
- It was also noted among stakeholders that vacant property is not the only property that is contributing to blight. Often time’s occupied property is the single biggest contributor to blight in a neighborhood.

Challenges Vacant Properties Pose

Focus group participants unanimously agreed that vacant property affects their work. In a majority of the discussions, participants voiced that vacant property was a challenge to the work that they do, despite this, some focus group participants identified ways in which vacant property could benefit their work within the community. Even the participants that provided ways in which vacant property was beneficial to their work, agreed that vacant property challenges far outweigh the benefits in terms of costs, capacity and the overall impact on the market. The bulleted list below outlines the vacant property factors that make their work challenging:

- An oversupply of housing/property as compared to the demand leads to continued issues with blight and property maintenance
- Vacant property lowers property values, dissuades new businesses or residents from moving into an area, and deters development or maintenance on occupied properties
- Properties are sold to investors or actors with little interest in making improvements, this negatively impacts the community by continuing the cycle of blight
- Vacant properties are attracting buyers that lack the motivation to maintain properties to the same standard as surrounding neighbors causing eyesores within the neighborhood
- The overabundance of vacant property is costly to public entities (e.g. CCLBA, cities, townships, villages) to maintain, track down owners, implement process, tax foreclose, etc.

Participants acknowledged the following ways in which vacant properties can benefit the mission of their organizations:

- Vacant property provides more opportunities for rehabilitation especially in stronger neighborhoods
- A larger supply of houses can provide more opportunities for homeownership
- Vacant land provides an opportunity for residents to grow food locally

Most Important Change Needed in Calhoun County

During the stakeholder meeting focus group participants were asked to provide what they think was the single most important change that needs to happen in Calhoun County to improve the quality of life for residents. Participants identified the following items as important changes to improve Calhoun County:

- Develop a shared approach and strategy to address vacant and blighted property in an effort to provide safe, affordable and permanent housing opportunities to residents
- Impact the supply and demand of property through demolition and redevelopment in an effort to raise property values and attract new residents
- Update of a master plan to guide decision-making
- Stronger communication among the county and local government entities
- Create a standard county-wide rental ordinance that is uniform to each jurisdiction
- Address the no minimum bid tax foreclosure auction to will protect the value of property in Calhoun County, incentivize compliant investors and provide disincentives to noncompliant absent investors
- Build a broad consensus among the community about the role of the land bank
- Create more local jobs
- Attract new residents and businesses through Calhoun County

Past and Current CCLBA Work

What has not worked well

When asked what CCLBA activity had not worked well in the past, most participants didn't comment on a specific program or activity, but rather offered comments regarding the lack of engagement, communication, and trust, much of which participants associated with the past administration. Participants voiced that in the past, there was a strong disconnect between CCLBA, local units, nonprofit organizations and other stakeholders. Though most participants were clear that the new CCLBA administration has established a marked shift in engagement, there is a lingering lack of trust with some local stakeholders. The bulleted list below outlines some summary points of feedback:

- The land bank was too risk adverse in the past. They wouldn't take a leadership role on projects without strong support from local units and wouldn't partner on a deal unless it had something in it for them

- There was no recognition from the land bank that their decisions would impact the local units so there was no engagement with the local units before decisions were made
- There was too much focus on what was good for the county as opposed to an individual community so some of the decisions they made ended up doing damage at the local level
- There was a lack of technical capacity and understanding at the land bank of the land bank tools

As mentioned, stakeholders did not offer many critiques aimed at past programs or activities. The bulleted list below outlines summary feedback on those points specifically:

- The NSP rehabilitation work was good but won't yield a return that justifies the level of investment in the property so the land bank shouldn't take on projects like that
- The land bank agreement with BCU was not a good deal because BCU has not kept the property well maintained and protected and it has led to delays in redeveloping the properties
- Local stakeholders are put in positions where they have to compete with the land bank for acquisition of properties either from banks or other entities and the local stakeholders can't access those properties

Beyond comments about CCLBA's past activities, participants generally expressed that they had a lack of knowledge or understanding of the land bank's programs and powers. All of the participants agreed that the presentation completed by CCLBA as part of the educational session was extremely beneficial, many had not known about the projects and activities that CCLBA highlighted. The most significant gap in knowledge existed with the smaller units of government.

What has worked well

When asked about what CCLBA has done well, participants made specific mention of the positive impact of the transition in leadership. They commented that the change in leadership brought increased communication, willingness to partner, and broader view of the land bank's potential impact. They also commented on specific programs like side lot disposition, acquisition, and rehabilitation. The bulleted list below highlights some comments about what has been working well:

- The improvements to the side lot disposition program have been successful and the program is good for the neighboring properties
- The gardening projects have been great
- Targeting tax foreclosed properties for acquisition has been helpful
- The rehabilitation partnership with CA has been really successful
- The blight removal work has made a huge impact in the community
- Recent improvements to communication and engagement on a variety of levels – their general availability to discuss items and the proactive soliciting of feedback and opinions on disposition, acquisition, and strategy

- The change in the view of their work – they aren't just looking at a single site anymore but the bigger picture impact they are trying to have
- The willingness to partner on a variety of projects and with a diversity of entities, regardless of politics

Future CCLBA Work

Next, participants were asked to discuss what roles they think CCLBA should play in order to impact the quality of life among residents in Calhoun County. The following is a categorized list of opportunities for future CCLBA work identified by stakeholders:

Acquisition

- Establish a predictable and routinized system to share information with local units and nonprofits about tax foreclosures before right of first refusal and for local units to request bundling of properties for acquisition

Blight elimination and maintenance

- Expand demolition program
- Develop a deconstruction program that connects to workforce development and resale of materials
- Strategically choose which properties to maintain and make sure it's done well
- Develop creative partnerships to maintain land like with the Sheriff to use community service labor

Land banking

- Hold properties for future economic development opportunities
- Hold properties that have no market or immediate reuse

Reuse

- Strengthen the side lot disposition program and its marketing
- Consider selling properties for less than \$200
- Expand the number of urban gardens

Development and rehabilitation

- Create and strengthen partnerships with Community Development Corporations and nonprofits to redevelop residential and mixed-use properties
- Complete more rehabilitation projects akin to the project with CA
- Partner with and attract private developers for rehabilitation opportunities
- Create a program that allows a prospective owner to fix up a property in exchange for property ownership
- Develop the capacity to manage and lead the rehabilitation process
- Institute minimum requirements for rehabilitation of property in the purchase agreements before a sale of land takes place

- Dispose of and/or redevelop commercial property
- Share information with potential buyers about the responsibilities of property ownership

Communication and engagement

- Engage all local units to create an overall comprehensive strategy for land bank work which can guide decisions on acquisition, maintenance, reuse, rehabilitation and disposition
- Provide information online for the public and stakeholders on current inventory
- Create and disseminate clear messaging on how to acquire property from the land bank
- Share an annual report or financials with the public so there's more transparency with the public
- Look for new partnership opportunities, like with Albion College
- Market properties in the inventory for buyers or investors/developers
- Create a communication and engagement strategy that will educate stakeholders on the land bank's strategy and programs and share the success stories on the work that has been completed
- Educate the community on the scale of the vacant property problem
- Create and strengthen partnerships with local units of government, particularly the smaller units of government
- Communicate with the State to get them interested in funneling funding to the County and local units
- Host targeted engagement meetings, one aimed at developers, one at nonprofits, one for local units, etc.
- Land bank should provide stakeholders with materials about the land bank to share so the education isn't coming from CCLBA alone
- Connect with neighborhood planning councils

Threats to success

Participants were asked what would threaten the successful implementation of future CCLBA work. The bulleted list below summarizes their feedback.

- Lack of funding
- Push back from the community about the selection of areas for activity, the choice of demolition over rehabilitation, and the lack of maintenance of properties
- Lack of understanding of why the land bank can't do all activities everywhere and maintain all properties
- At the elected official, government staffer, nonprofit, and resident level a lack of knowledge and understanding of what the land bank does or can do and why they do it
- Selling land too cheaply and depressing values or attracting the wrong buyers
- Realtors feeling like the land bank work isn't benefiting them or is restricting their ability to succeed
- Landlord association feeling like there's additional regulation or impediments

- Lack of understanding from the public and stakeholders about how large and pervasive the vacant property issue is and the basics of how a market functions