

Wayne County Land Bank Assessment Report

This report suggests ways to improve the Wayne County Land Bank's programs and overall presence within Wayne County. The Practicum team focused on two communities in Wayne County: Highland Park and River Rouge. This report includes a literature review on land banks, a socio-economic profile of the two communities within Wayne County, a comparison of land banks in Michigan similar to WCLB, a community outreach survey, and an analysis of the land bank's current programs. This report aimed to analyze each aspect of the WCLB activities and assess whether the WCLB is fulfilling its primary objective of returning blighted and vacant properties to productive use. Through this process, the Practicum team identified several findings and recommendations for the WCLB.

The analysis of the socio-economic profile of Highland Park and River Rouge found multiple indicators contributing to blight, including high unemployment and high rates of uneducated citizens. High housing vacancy rates are also an issue in Wayne County, with 16.3% of housing being vacant. In River Rouge, the vacancy rate is 22.5%, and Highland Park experiences 34.3% vacancy.

As part of the research, 103 municipal employees were surveyed to gauge their engagement with the WCLB. A response rate of 37% gave insight into where the WCLB might focus its efforts. Positive and negative responses were received, and suggestions were incorporated into the overall recommendations. The report also found that the WCLB website lacked sufficient functionality to engage with the neighborhoods it serves. WCLB does not currently have social media linked to its website, which could be another way to increase WCLB exposure.

An analysis of the two most active WCLB programs, the Side Lot program and Compliance program, found that sales from these programs have been decreasing in both Highland Park and River Rouge. A significant proportion of properties sold in these programs between 2017 and 2021 relapsed, with 17.5% of Compliance Lots and 21.2% Side Lot re-entering WCLB inventory after being sold.

A review of Michigan land banks, including the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), Genesee County Land Bank (GCLB), and the Ingham County Land Bank (ICLB), was conducted to gauge how WCLB operates in comparison. All four land banks have similar Side Lot, Rehabilitation, and Demolition Programs. There is a difference in size between all four land banks; DLBA holds 76,180 properties, GCLB has 14,359, and WCLB has 1,118 properties. ICLB has the fewest properties, only 349. WCLB also conducts fewer demolitions than the other land banks; in 2015, WCLB completed less than 10 properties, ICLB demolished 384 structures, while the GCLB and DLBA demolished thousands. Demolishing structures is costly, indicating funding may be an issue for WCLB.

The high vacancy rates of Highland Park and River Rouge, various feedback received from surrounding municipalities, issues discovered when using the WCLB's website, and reported missing funding for demolitions were all considered when identifying the needs of WCLB. In collaboration with the Wayne County Land Bank, these findings led to a number of recommendations which are designed to improve WCLB's effectiveness, presence, and overall success.

Rehabilitation Recommendations

WCLB should implement a system to improve compliance monitoring and reporting. Creating a uniform compliance period for all communities engaged with the WCLB will help track various data points such as inventory. Other data sets such as changes in property values, street conditions, and amount of vacant land can be used to identify trends and thus help improve program requirements.

Side Lot Program Recommendations

WCLB should create a system to distinguish between qualified and non-qualified purchasers. This system can notify eligible buyers and educate them on the Side Lot program and its benefits. A formal monitoring system can be used to ensure the new owner maintains and rehabilitates their property as agreed. WCLB should require Side Lot buyers to submit their plans for the Side Lot in question as part of the sale process. This will add a level of accountability to the process that is not currently in place.

Potential buyers often want tax and liability data. WCLB should have total tax and liability data for each of its properties. Publishing this data on the website could also be helpful to potential buyers. A concept not-yet-used in Michigan, as it is exclusive to the city of Philadelphia, is the Landcare Program. Many WCLB properties are vacant lots with little to no lawn care. This program would be effective on vacant Side Lots where no structures are present.

Focusing on one city or street in Wayne County could potentially influence and motivate surrounding property owners to better maintain their land.

Website/Community Outreach Recommendations

Although the Tax Exemption Program already exists within the WCLB, adding information regarding it to the WCLB website would help provide awareness of its existence to Wayne County residents. The Wayne County Treasury Office has seen success in reducing foreclosure through Wayne County Tax Exemption programs. Providing the same information on the WCLB website could help WCLB buyers who may face foreclosure in the future.

The WCLB's website is not currently compatible with mobile devices. Formatting issues along with a homepage that provides a minimal amount of content and information detracts from potential client engagement. This report finds that the Detroit Land Bank Authority's webpage is an excellent example of what the WCLB website should emulate. Fixing formatting issues to include an opening page that engages and informs potential clients, as well as having up-to-date information on current land bank activities, and a functioning tab system.

Currently, the WCLB has no social media, while other Michigan Land Banks such as the GCLB and the DLBA have links on the homepage to active social media accounts that cover land bank activities. The addition of a social media page for the WCLB would be useful in attracting new clients, give WCLB a platform to show Wayne County residents the positive impacts the WCLB has on the community and would increase accessibility to residents regarding events and public meetings. A Facebook page, for example, would offer the convenience of information to a wide array of demographics.

The recommendations presented in this report, coupled with the data collected, suggest several opportunities for Wayne County Land Bank to improve programs and strengthen relationships with WCLB communities. Much research already exists illustrating how other land banks have been successful, proving there are good opportunities with these types of programs. The implementation of these recommendations will enhance WCLB's presence in the Wayne County community and serve as tools in bringing once blighted and vacant properties back into productive use.