Report from Richard F. Herbek, Acting City Manager

Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference at Renaissance Cleveland Hotel

October 12 – October 15, 2010

Many cities in the United States are in trouble. Despite signs of economic recovery, vacant and abandoned homes and property continue to blight cities and towns, affecting property values and providing a haven for illegal activities.

The conference, sponsored by the Center for Community Progress and Neighborhood Progress, involved government leaders, academics, community activists and nonprofit leaders from across the country in discussions of strategies for turning vacant properties from public eyesores to community assets. We learned not only about cities that have successfully reclaimed vacant areas but also how to implement these successful strategies and overcome barriers to progress.

Workshops and plenary sessions that I attended featured speakers from government and nonprofit organizations who touched on a wide variety of topics. Some of the workshops I attended were:

Detroit Shoreway: A Neighborhood with a View, a Community with a Vision. This involved a tour and discussion of how unique partnerships have preserved historic community fabric in one of Cleveland's diverse neighborhoods while creating affordable, energy-efficient, transit-connected housing, a vibrant arts district, and a planned boulevard connecting residents with the lakefront.

Re-Imagining America's Older Industrial Cities – The discussion evolved around the future of America's shrinking older cities. After decades of population and job loss, cities like Youngstown, Cleveland, and Detroit have embarked on ambitious efforts to re-imagine themselves as smaller but healthier cities, taking a fresh look at reusing land, revitalizing neighborhoods, and building new economic engines.

The Memphis Approach: Broad Community Engagement in the Problem Property Battle: Panelists told the story of how the private sector and community development corporations are working together to engage government and the courts in addressing vacant properties, blight, and neighborhood deterioration. We learned how Memphis's unique, inclusive partnership has moved vacant and abandoned property issues forward, how to build the right team and how incremental victories helped build momentum for the larger wins down the road.

Two Birds with One Stone? Strategies to Address Crime and Vacancy – A panel of police, prosecutors, and community developers compared systems for addressing overlapping crime and vacancy hot spots. Presenters described how community prosecution systems leverage nuisance abatement tools and community partnerships that address crime problems rooted in vacant properties.

Carrots or Sticks: Debating Incentives and Penalties for Simulating Reinvestment – We learned about strategies for encouraging responsible developers to acquire and improve vacant properties. The discussion also involved how government can do a better job of compelling negligent owners to comply with codes or give up control of deteriorated properties. The speakers noted that although there is no "silver bullet" strategy that can guarantee success everywhere, tax abatements, differential tax rate, vacant property registration mandates, and other measures have produced constructive results in a number of municipalities' and counties.

We also took advantage of the networking opportunity since more than 900 people were in attendance at the conference from all across the United States.

Respectfully submitted,

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City of Newburgh