

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is in support of the City of Muskegon Heights' efforts to efficiently use recently allocated Hardest Hit dollars, granted to the Muskegon County Land Bank Authority (MCLBA) for residential demolition and to provide assistance for blight remediation strategies for a long-term reduction in structural and non-structural blight in the City. The City of Muskegon Heights is home to some of the most concentrated blight within Muskegon County and through a partnership with the City of Muskegon Heights, the MCLBA, and Muskegon County, this plan aims to provide a coherent and organized strategy to be followed by local agencies to reduce blight in the City, increase activity in the downtown and improve the quality of life of Muskegon Heights residents.

The methods used to complete this scope of work includes a detailed socioeconomic profile, a cursory analysis of the conditions of all parcels within the project's study area, a rating of the conditions of each face block within the study area, a detailed analysis of the structural conditions of each structure on nine focus blocks (selected based on face-block ratings), a commercial corridor study, a parcel vacancy analysis of structures in the downtown, extensive community input via a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) exercise and a general community preferences survey. The socioeconomic profile of the area includes data which compares conditions in Muskegon Heights with Muskegon County and the State of Michigan in most cases. The parcel condition assessments were completed by the Practicum team and local partners in two separate visits to Muskegon Heights, these windshield surveys assessed all parcels in the study area first in a cursory fashion and then in a more detailed fashion on given blocks using the tool laid out in the Methodology section of this report. Commercial vacancy information was collected from a thorough walking survey, phone calls to businesses and online research. Collected data was mapped in the figures laid out throughout this report. Community input was collected in several ways, mainly via a SWOT session conducted on January 27th, 2015 and via online input for those who could not attend. The input received in these sessions is located in the Appendix of this report. Feedback received in these sessions, in addition to the goals and strategies of the 2012 Muskegon Heights Master Plan guided the recommendations made in this report.

Through the methods conducted above, the Practicum team was able to analyze the study area and determine the existing conditions. In this research the planning team gained a deeper understanding of socioeconomic data for the City of Muskegon Heights including trends within categories such as racial

composition, median income, and residential vacancy among others. Since the Great Recession, Muskegon Heights has struggled with each of these issues with median incomes not following statewide trends of a slight rise, and residential vacancy growing. The City has sought the development of a coordinated strategy to confront these challenges.

The research compiled created a foundation for the recommendations, with a focus on blighted residential properties and vacant or abandoned commercial properties. Face block ratings were used to analyze the concentration of blight throughout the study area and when mapped, provided a visual representation of overall block health within the study area limits. The practicum team found that few areas have a severe concentration of blight and that it seems rather to be dispersed throughout the city. The practicum team also discovered that not all of the current preliminary demolition locations for Hardest Hit funding match with current practices and the “tipping point” model of neighborhood blight elimination deemed in this plan to be the most effective way of undertaking residential blight elimination. In addition, the team discovered potential opportunities for current funding to be used in a more innovative and effective manner.

The practicum team found that 3% of the allocated Community Development Block Grant funding, or \$12,000 is dedicated to code enforcement within the city, and \$20,000 is dedicated to the demolition of blighted homes. The information collected from downtown analyses indicated that the majority of the structures in Downtown, while in good condition, are vacant or underutilized. Of the 58 parcels in the downtown focus area, 27 of them contain vacant buildings, 12 are vacant lots, and 17 have operating businesses. Research indicated that there is a lack of funding for commercial activity within the downtown, an inactive DDA and no known incentives for potential investors.

Based on the analysis, recommendations were made addressing ways to improve residential conditions and improve the downtown commercial area. For residential blight, the recommendations include prioritizing demolition, exploring the feasibility of deconstruction, increasing code enforcement efforts through multiple strategies, and creating a plan for post-demolition activity. Recommendations to revitalize the downtown include conducting a study to examine the potential influence of a façade improvement program, the redevelopment of the Strand Theater, prioritization of downtown (re)development via phasing, and participation in the Redevelopment Ready Communities program. These recommendations together provide a roadmap to reducing structural and non-structural blight in the community, revitalizing existing business districts and attracting new businesses to the Downtown, and most importantly, engaging residents in the improvement of their community.