WHAT ARE VACANT PROPERTIES?
We define vacant properties as vacant residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and lots that exhibit one or both of the following traits:

- The site poses a threat to public safety (meeting the definition of a public nuisance), or

- The owners or managers neglect the fundamental duties of property ownership (e.g., they fail to pay taxes or utility bills, default on mortgages, or carry liens against the property.)

Vacant properties include abandoned, boarded-up buildings; unused lots that attract trash and debris; vacant or under-performing commercial properties, known as greyfields (such as under-leased shopping malls and strip commercial properties); and neglected industrial properties with environmental contamination, known as brownfields.

The National Vacant Properties Campaign exists to provide everyone—individuals, advocates, government agencies, developers, non-profits, and others—with information resources, tools, and assistance to support their vacant property revitalization efforts.

The Campaign is a project of Smart Growth America (SGA), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. We are supported by generous grants from the Fannie Mae Foundation, the U.S. EPA, the Ford Foundation, the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

“Behind every vacant property there is a story. The trick is to find that story and address the underlying issues.”

—Diane Silva-Martinez, Head Deputy City Attorney, San Diego, California
Far from being confined to urban and industrial areas, the abandonment of properties is a national phenomenon. Rapid growth on the fringes of many metropolitan regions has sucked development from urban cores and inner-ring suburbs. Abandonment takes many forms, but no matter how the phenomenon manifests itself, the increasingly profound effects are the same: lower tax revenues, higher municipal costs, and serious environmental and public health consequences. As communities plot their comeback, they must address the scourge of vacant properties.

Fortunately, many cities are now realizing the opportunity that these properties represent to redefine their communities. Cities like Philadelphia, Pa. and Flint, Mich. are joined by others such as San Diego, Calif., Tucson, Ariz., and Louisville, Ky. in taking aggressive action to attack the problem and prevent it from spreading.

More good news is that effective vacant property reclamation efforts are coming from a broad set of stakeholders—from environmental advocates who see property reclamation as a way to offset urban sprawl to housing groups seeking to create affordable homes to those interested in preserving a community’s history.

“In Genesee County, we are seeing that a concerted effort by local government to return vacant properties to productive use is attracting needed partners to the effort. Collaboration among government, philanthropic, and community stakeholders is critical to the success of our efforts here.”

—Dan Kildee
Treasurer
Genesee County, Michigan
Many cities and counties have begun innovative efforts to reclaim their vacant and abandoned properties. The Campaign, launched in 2003, maintains its original mission: to capture model practices, share them with other communities, and help inspire creativity and leadership in communities nationwide.

**Campaign Goals**

The overarching goal of the Campaign is to help communities prevent abandonment, reclaim vacant properties, and once again become vital places to live. We fulfill this mission through four actions:

**Developing a national network of vacant property practitioners and experts**
We engage a diverse coalition of national and local partners, including experts, academics, elected officials, local practitioners, foundations, and community developers.

**Providing tools and research**
We collect and disseminate compelling evidence of the economic, environmental, and community benefits of vacant property reclamation, and effective strategies for achieving this goal.

**Making the case for reclamation efforts**
We help transform ideas into action by developing persuasive messages for spokespersons, and inspiring the public to demand the best for their communities.

**Building the capacity of local, regional, and national practitioners and decisionmakers through technical assistance and training**
We provide expert assistance to practitioners and policymakers from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to jump-start and improve their reclamation efforts.
Campaign Activities

The Campaign provides innovative strategies and tools to transform abandoned houses, boarded factories, vandalized stores, and vacant lots into safe, inviting places for people to work, live, and play. Highlights of our accomplishments include:

- **Coordinating teams of national experts and practitioners** to help local officials adopt cutting-edge strategies for reclaiming their communities in more than 14 states.

- **Organizing local and statewide forums.** Over 150 participants attended the Land Bank Authority forum in Flint, Mich., sponsored by the C.S. Mott and Ford Foundations. Campaign leaders have since met with six cities to develop local authorities. Practitioners from throughout Ohio met at the state’s first vacant properties forum, funded by the Ford Foundation. In 2007, the Campaign will host the first national conference on vacant properties.

- **Partnering with the United States Conference of Mayors and the Fannie Mae Foundation** to develop a vacant properties task force to provide mayors with in-depth knowledge and experience in vacant property strategies and with the ability to be national spokespersons to educate other municipalities.

For metropolitan areas looking to accommodate growth without consuming the surrounding countryside, vacant properties amount to a large reservoir of land for well-planned development.

The Campaign’s work in **Cleveland, Ohio** illustrates the positive results that can occur when a community is motivated to act. Within a few hours of the release of the Campaign’s assessment report, *Cleveland at the Crossroads*, the mayor announced a new “Zero Blight Initiative” to aggressively address the city’s vacant property issues. Seven major city and county agencies and local community development intermediaries created the Vacant Property Coordinating Council to carry out the report’s recommendations. The members of the Council have each adopted the findings of the report, coordinated their efforts to reduce inefficiencies, and identified their collective priorities from the study.
Producing information resources to guide citizens and decisionmakers in their efforts at revitalization. Reports include *Vacant Properties: The True Costs to Communities* and *Land Bank Authorities: A Guide for the Creation and Operation of Local Land Banks*.

Building an internet portal, supported by the U.S. EPA, which compiles the most relevant information for anyone interested in issues related to vacant properties.

Developing a museum exhibition on vacant properties with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to showcase how effective vacant property reclamation can reconnect neighborhoods back into the life of a city.

Contributing to conferences and making more than 50 presentations before national groups, such as the American Planning Association, Local Government Commission, ICMA, National League of Cities, and National Trust for Historic Preservation.

“I don’t believe there is a more competent team anywhere in the country for tackling issues—and crafting appropriate solutions—related to vacant and neglected property in urban cities.”

—Frank Ford
Neighborhood Progress, Inc.
Cleveland, Ohio
Technical Assistance

To ensure that municipalities don’t struggle alone in solving the problems associated with vacant and abandoned properties, we engage our partners in a range of training and technical assistance services. In the past two years, the Campaign has convened workshops and conducted in-depth policy assessments throughout the country, from Las Vegas, Nev. to New Orleans, La., from Waterloo, Iowa to Cleveland and Dayton, Ohio. The Surdna Foundation is funding work in seven additional cities in 2005 and 2006.

The Campaign offers the following services to address the needs of jurisdictions across the country:

- **Systems Assessments**: The Campaign organizes small teams of experts to conduct thorough assessments of current vacant property policies, practices, inventory, and goals to identify the primary local challenges and appropriate strategies for addressing them.

- **Roundtables**: Roundtables are one- or two-day facilitated workshops led by a team of national experts and experienced practitioners, to educate local leaders and practitioners about effective prevention, acquisition, and disposition models, and identify appropriate revitalization strategies and tools.

- **Specific Strategies Implementations**: Cities can work with one or two members of a team to develop specific implementation strategies, such as reforming foreclosure procedures and legislation, creating land bank authorities, drafting receivership legislation, and designing and implementing early warning and inventory systems.

- **Leadership Consultations**: We facilitate visits by public officials from other cities implementing effective local programs or policies to those seeking to improve their revitalization efforts, with a focus on peer-to-peer information exchange.

- **Trainings**: The Campaign provides periodic training opportunities through distance learning venues, including web casts, “cyber brown bags,” and conference calls to educate practitioners and policymakers on topics relevant to vacant properties.

**Expertise**

Each team of experts is assembled to best meet the needs of your community. The teams, led by LISC and the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, often include staff from Smart Growth America and the Smart Growth Leadership Institute, members of the Campaign’s Advisory Committee, and previous assessment hosts.
The National Vacant Properties Campaign is a project of Smart Growth America (SGA), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. The Campaign is supported by generous grants from the Fannie Mae Foundation, the U.S. EPA, the Ford Foundation, the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
Don Chen, Campaign Chair
Jennifer Leonard, Campaign Director
Lisa Mueller Levy, Director of Technical Assistance
Joseph Schilling, Director of Research and Policy

For more information and to get involved, visit the web site at
http://www.vacantproperties.org

PHOTO CREDITS: cover: Ken LeBlanc; page one, top: JM Schilling; page one, bottom left: JM Schilling; page one, bottom right: JR Leonard; page two: JM Schilling; page three, top: John Baker; page three, middle: Baltimore Housing; page four: JM Schilling; page five, top: JM Schilling; page five, bottom left: Michigan Land Use Institute (MLUI)/Mac McClelland; page five, bottom middle: Dannielle Glaros; page five, bottom right: MLUI/Mac McClelland; page six: JM Schilling.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Frank Alexander, Emory University*
Carl Anthony, Ford Foundation
Charles Bartsch, Northeast Midwest Institute
Noreen Beatley, The Enterprise Foundation
Lavea Brachman, Delta Institute
Kim Burnett, Surdna Foundation
Carol Coletta, CEOs for Cities
Carlton Eley, U.S. EPA, Development, Community, and Environment Division
Dan Emerine, International City/County Management Association
Mindy Fullilove, Columbia University
Peter Harnik, Trust for Public Land
Rick Haughey, Urban Land Institute
Dan Kildee, Treasurer, Genesee County, Michigan*
John Kromer, Fels Institute of Government
Alan Mallach, National Housing Institute
Joseph Molinaro, National Association of Realtors
Rachel Morello-Frosch, Brown University
Anne Pasmanick, National Neighborhood Coalition
John Powell, Ohio State University
Joseph Reilly, JPMorgan Chase
Carey Shea, Habitat for Humanity-New York City
Diane Silva-Martinez, City of San Diego
Susie Sinclair-Smith, Fannie Mae Foundation
Israel Small, City of Savannah, Georgia
Heather Smith, Congress for the New Urbanism
Jeff Soule, American Planning Association
Jennifer Vey, Brookings Institution, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy
Renee Viers, National Trust for Historic Preservation

* affiliations used for identification purposes only