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Home and lot abandonment has plagued the city of Detroit for several years. Detroit hit its highest population of about 1.85 million in the year 0f 1950 (4). However, after several mishaps including the racial tensions, the 1967 Riots, industrial movement, and poor leadership, Detroit’s population has dwindled to a mere 701,475in the year 2012 (3)(4). The most notable shift in racial makeup of the city came after the 1967 Riots, before which the city was composed of 16 percent African Americans and after which it was composed of 82% leaving the African Americans to deal with the deteriorating city and extreme poverty that plagued the city after the white population left and took its wealth (3). This sharp shift makes the event a notable turn for the worst for Detroit. With more and more people eager to leave Detroit, many people felt pressured into doing whatever they can to escape, including abandoning their homes in pursuit of a brighter future ultimately creating a domino effect that continues to haunt Detroit (1). With no one left to attend to or maintain the homes, the quality of life and value of the properties of neighboring homes and institutions began to dwindle until they too felt the need to leave before conditions worsened (5). A common suggestion to deal with the problem is destroying the blight however, though this suggestion may seem like the practical and default solution, demolishing an abandoned house can exceed $10,000 (1). According to the May 2014 Report of the Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority, the city of Detroit successfully eliminated 768 buildings using roughly $8 million of the allocated $10 million (2). Blight has become a major concern to Detroit due as it is directly linked to environmental, health and economic disparities including: industrial waste dumping and water contamination, increase likelihood of depression, rodent based disease, decrease property value and thus decrease tax revenue used to pay for standard programs such as education and health care (6). If Detroit hopes to recover, it must begin by tackling blight and vacancies. A public policy implemented that aims to combat Detroit’s blight and vacancy epidemic is the Land Bank Fast Track Act, or the Act 258 of 2003, which aimed to assist the government by taking responsibility of the majority of vacant properties and finding useful ways to repurpose and revitalize the areas (12). Though this policy is currently in effect, it continues to face problems that place a large strain on its efficiency and thus undermines its potential.

Prior and after the establishment of the Land Bank several attempts have been made to help Detroit but have resulted in small and almost insignificant successes that have encouraged Detroit to turn to faster and more tangible policies such as the Land Bank Authority. Because Detroit has been facing a clear decline, most noticeably since the 1967 Riots, it is evident that several attempts to solve the issue of blight have been introduced in an effort to relieve Detroit from this burden. A rather idealistic approach to solving this problem is the introduction of urban farming that has been a hot topic for urban centers, including Detroit, for several years (7). Founder of Urban Farming, Taja Seville, has been around the United states hoping to gain support for the introduction of urban farming in areas of high vacancy such as Detroit, Los Angeles and, but not limited to, Cleveland (8). Detroit has welcomed her with open arms by providing 20 plots of vacant land and water (8). The garden, as expected, has received wide spread support from locals as it encourages the improvement of aesthetic, community interaction, confidence and, most importantly, hope (8). The policy is run by the civic sphere meaning it is nearly impossible to scale at a city wide level. However, when the business sphere attempts to interfere and use this method to solve the problem, it is evident that the locals feel a lot less comfortable and a lot more skeptical. In October of 2013, the Hantz Woodlands project was introduced, allowing Hantz Farms, a Detroit based organization, to purchase around 140 acres of land to initiate a commercial size urban farm and forest (7). Unfortunately, however, this project will take a toll on the company itself as the company will be responsible for paying for everything, including blight removal that could cost up to $2 million and on the locals as they will be forced to accept the project despite opposition and fears of a land grab as well as the exploitation of land by the wealthy people (9). Commercial urban farming is a long and tedious process as the land must be up to par at all times if it is to be turned into useful commodity. In addition to maintaining the property, the developers and planners must take into account the problems that arise with choosing an urban setting including potential lead contamination of the soil, air pollution from livestock, and contamination of water leading to greater disapproval from the general public (10). In addition, Detroit government officials fear that the introduction of urban will farms will attract pollution and noise as well as contentions over zoning and no promising and direct results (11). Urban farming is a common source of controversy as downscaling to family and civic spheres tends to yield positive yet limited results and up scaling to government and business tends to yield uncertain results and widespread dissatisfaction making it a less palpable solution proving that more significant solutions are bound to take priority.

A policy of larger scale however that has been implemented at the federal government level is the establishment of a Detroit Land Bank. The Land Bank Fast Track Act, also known as Act 258 of 2003, is a public policy implemented that aims to establish land bank authorities that will function in aiding the government in dealing with tax-reverted properties and turning them into useful and plots of land that are capable of generating tax (12). The Michigan Land Bank has branches in several of Michigan’s cities, including Detroit. In an interview conducted by NPR between interviewer Jason Margolis and interviewee as well as Detroit Land Bank employee, Craig Fahle, in 2015, Fahle admitted that Detroit Land Bank controlled a quarter of Detroit’s property which is roughly 88,000 parcels of land that must be repurposed (5). The land bank has devised several potential solutions to deal with the problem including auction programs, side lot sales, direct sale of property, blight demolition, rehabilitation and sale of properties and even offering discounts of up to 50% off of bid price to Detroit residents and their families (13). The auction program aims to show case Detroit Land Bank owned homes that are sturdy enough to be sold to prospective buyers in hopes that the customers will purchase the home and renovate it as best they could (13a). The side lot sale initiative is a less complicated solution that permits neighbors of vacant lots to purchase the lots at a modest price of $100, ultimately expanding their land and claiming responsibility for its future condition (13b). The demolitions program aims to destroy the buildings that pose the greatest threats (13c). Finally, the City of Detroit Discounts aims to provide discounts to Detroit residents in hopes that it will provide a greater incentive for residents to purchase the homes and thus increase efficiency (13d). The success of this policy however is largely dependent on a delicate interaction between the government, civic, family, and business spheres. All spheres must play a role to ensure the proper and responsible allocation of land is occurring. It is for this reason also that this is a product of an institution rather than strictly an agent. It embodies the qualities of an institution that by acting as an agent in repurposing and ensuring proper use of land in a specific manner yet acting as a structure by creating rules that limit sales to certain populations or setting restrictions on certain interested buyers. With so many sub-policies that were erected following the enactment of the Land Bank Fast Track Act it can be easily assumed that the policy is generating desirable results and ultimately proving to be a success. However, it is crucial to understand that though the policy may appear to be a success at face value, it is constantly confronted with problems that are placing a strain on its efficiency.

When erecting a policy, it is almost impossible to be completely free of restrictions set by structures. In the case of the Land Bank Fast Track Act the greatest and most notable structure is the federal government as it is responsible for allocating the money needed for the expensive blight demolitions (2). The Land Bank must ensure that it constantly receives federal grants in order to survive and fund its programs (15). The profit generated by lot sales or auctions is not nearly enough to keep the land bank running efficiently enough to keep up with Detroit’s excessively large vacancy rates and thus the bank is to look for other sources to secure the budget. In order to make up for such predicaments, the land Bank is left to constantly look for methods to overcome such structures such as reaching out and cooperating with neighborhoods through programs like the Community Partners program that encourages neighborhoods and religious groups to participate in the improvement and beautification of the areas in hopes of attracting buyers rather than reverting to expensive home demolition (15). The Land Bank’s ultimate goal is to increase the value of vacant land in a cost effective way and it can only be done so with additional help from other spheres such as civic and family as noted by the Community Partners program. In addition, a structure that is much more difficult to attack and control is nature. According to the Report of the Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority of the State of Michigan, “the Land Bank has received 107 complaints regarding a variety of issues including noxious weeds and grass, dangerous tree encroaching upon contagious properties, broken fences and electrical wires as a result of Land Bank owned tree branches failing, debris and rodents” (2). The Land Bank being responsible for a fourth of Detroit’s properties is left to deal with an enormous amount of landscape maintenance however it is nearly impossible simultaneously to maintain all of the properties leaving some reliance on locals (5). Finally, an increase and desperosity to distribute and repurpose the land has led to irresponsible distribution of land that leaves many prospective buyers wary when thinking of buying a formerly abandoned or foreclosed home in Detroit. Prior to purchasing a home from the Land Bank, customers are left with a plateful to think about s they must consider whether they are willing to live in a house that is currently occupied by residents who will be evicted due to inability to pay mortgages in a timely fashion or if they are willing to purchase land at a cheap price but pay hefty renovation fees that will be necessary to make the homes inhabitable (16). These structural barriers are the main drawbacks that the Land Bank has always and will always be forced to face.

The Land Bank continues to face these structures by reaching out to several spheres and approaching the situation from various angles. The Community Partners Program, as mentioned before, was the Land Banks attempt to reach out to the community to best avoid the cost of demolition by making the house seem attractive or limit the damage to the home through community intervention, however it is not enough to simply ask of a family or civic sphere to intervene. These two spheres in specific cannot be forced into doing something if they do not want to end even if there was intervention from their end, there are other problems that undermine the community efforts. It is not uncommon for neighbors of abandoned homes to maintain the property by mowing the grass and delaying the decay as much as possible, however these efforts are often voided when drugs, gangs and violence make their way into these vacant properties (17). Families living adjacent to abandoned homes have often reached out to the Land Bank asking them to buy the property and demolish the building, hoping that they would be able to buy the leveled lot and get rid of the crime that is associated with the abandoned homes (17). The Land Bank however searches for cheap and quick solutions to the abandonment and blight problem meaning requests like these from locals are often overlooked and ignored (18). According to the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute, only 17% of the land homes auctioned off were inhabited and 17% of auctioned off property was resold within a time frame of less than a year (18). In addition, the Land Banks Detroit residents discount program that gives Detroit residents a 50% discount on auctioned property has been exploited in ways the Land Bank hadn’t expected. Many city employees have been accused of rigging the auctions and after winning and paying the 50%, the winning bidder does not move in as is required, but instead sells the land for a greater price (19). These unexpected setbacks have revealed that the Land Bank, though to some extent is a success, faces major draw backs that brings it closer and closer the failure end of the spectrum.

These mishaps have not been easily over looked as an increase in police intervention and regulations have been introduce to combat these scandals and protect the integrity of the Land Bank (19). In addition, several proposals are constantly brought to the table such as the creation of the Blight Removal Task Force (BRTF) in 2013 that has been not only successful in increasing the rate and effectiveness of blight demolition but also the introduction of jobs (20). In addition, the civic spheres such as the Urban Development Corporation have been working towards taking land overlooked by the Land Bank or the BRTF and transforming them into places that could improve the quality of life of locals, one neighborhood at a time (21). Though these civic inspired solutions are not able to scale, they are able to slowly influence and provide a buffer that will strengthen the effects of policies such as the Land Bank or the BRTF.

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