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Milwaukee's Push to Turn Vacant Land into Urban Farms.

After one of the longer winters in recent memory, the city of Milwaukee is planning to engage in a new kind of rebirth. As the ice melts away, a number of parcels of city-owned land that have long lain vacant and unused will be coming back to life, set to become urban farms and orchards yielding healthy food along with new opportunities for employment and business entrepreneurship.

It's all part of Mayor Tom Barrett's [HOME GR/OWN](#) program, a [Bloomberg Mayors Challenge](#) finalist whose mission, beyond increasing access to fruits and vegetables, is to turn the city's growing liability of vacant, foreclosed land into an asset: space for new economic activity that helps to stabilize distressed neighborhoods. We recently had a chance to talk with HOME GR/OWN's program manager, Tim McCollow, about the program's launch now that spring appears to finally be on its way.

When vacant properties in Milwaukee are tax-foreclosed, ending up under city ownership, they become substantial liabilities, costing the city \$250 to \$1,000 annually in direct costs of upkeep. And there are serious indirect impacts: attracting crime, stymying neighborhood cohesion and development, eating away at civic morale, and keeping property values, wealth creation and supportive tax revenues low.

The city is working in a smart way to shift these property liabilities out of the municipal budget and convert them to assets. HOME GR/OWN, a 2013 startup, is related to another effort Barrett launched this year: [the Strong Neighborhoods Investment Plan](#). With \$11.8 million in city funding, it aims to intensify the marketing of salvageable homes, raze 300 that are beyond repair and fund vacant-lot rehabilitation. HOME GR/OWN will help neighborhood associations, nonprofits and social entrepreneurs turn those vacant properties into the pieces of a new distributed food system.

Milwaukee is taking the steps needed to remove barriers to this revitalization. The city is reviewing internal processes, permitting and ordinances, and even designing "templates" of potential reuses, including costing and contracting models to help guide interested parties. In part due to the elimination of uncertainty and clarification of the process, many nonprofits and neighborhood associations already have signed on.

That aspect of hyper-local participation was no accident: HOME GR/OWN is designed to leverage existing resources and social capital already present in the neighborhoods targeted for revitalization. The launch of the program consists largely of parcels within the Lindsay Heights neighborhood, both because the area is troubled and in need of revitalization but also because of the rich network of funders and nonprofits already involved there.

While Milwaukee is building HOME GR/OWN through partnerships with nonprofits and social entrepreneurs, ultimately the goal is that program participation will be commercial as well, and McCollow sees Milwaukee as a perfect "national lab" to test the long-term commercial viability of urban agriculture. Ultimately, it's the city's hope that the market can drive this effort, needing only be helped along the way by municipal efforts.

Certainly the potential benefits of urban agriculture are multifaceted. One of the first well-developed urban-agriculture programs was Philadelphia's Greensgrow Project, which was founded in 1998 through the Reinvestment Fund (an initiative of [the federal Community Development Financial Institutions Fund](#)) and has continued to expand its community-supported agricultural effort. Greensgrow's vision is for people and communities nationwide to see urban agriculture as a useful tool in creating and sustaining regional food economies. Philadelphia has developed [a robust set of partnerships](#) that produce better use of the land and healthier food as well.

[Many other cities](#) have been developing complete urban agriculture programs to turn former costs into benefits. For example, San Francisco's Department of Public Works saves about \$4,000 annually when urban agriculture replaces a vacant lot formerly festering with dumping, vandalism and degradation. In New York City, a study of community gardens showed that they can bring about a 10 percent increase in surrounding property values, translating into community wealth accumulation as well as higher tax revenues to support city services.

To Milwaukee's Tim McCollow, there are literal as well as figurative "healing aspects of food production." Taking each vacant property off the city's ledgers eliminates another small drain on its budget, but more importantly HOME GR/OWN aims to rebuild the city through the growth of a new local industry that adds to Milwaukee's health, well-being and vibrancy.

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