

## \$2B needed to wipe out Detroit's blight in 5 years, task force says

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*The Somerset Apartments, abandoned for several years, was torn down in early April after a suspicious fire. A task force has released a plan to rid Detroit of blight in five years or less. / Mary Schroeder/Detroit Free Press*

### Top blight recommendations

- Take aggressive action to gain title to blighted properties.
- Hire more inspectors and hearing officers.
- Establish demolition review board to speedily review complaints of dangerous buildings.
- Survey the 380,000 parcels in the city to keep database up-to-date.
- Establish two new recycling centers to promote reuse of lumber and other materials salvaged from blighted houses.
- Help smaller contractors obtain air-monitoring devices needed for the demolition work.

The task is immense, but the time is now.

That was the message Tuesday as Mayor Mike Duggan joined leaders of the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force to release the most in-depth road map ever to eradicate eyesore houses and trash-strewn lots from the city, a crucial next step in rebuilding bankrupt Detroit.

It will take \$850 million to clean up residential neighborhoods and nearby retail strips over the next five years, and about \$2 billion total when adding in huge commercial edifices such as the Packard Plant and the Michigan Central Station.

About \$456 million in federal money and from other sources has been identified, leaving a gap of about \$394 million still needed to clean up the neighborhoods. That money could come from savings from the bankruptcy, officials said.

The task force concluded that Detroit suffers with 84,641 blighted or nearly blighted structures and vacant lots, of which some 40,000 are so bad off they should be demolished and cleaned up immediately. Also, 93% of the tens of thousands of tax-foreclosed Detroit properties held by the city, county and state are in really bad shape and should be knocked down or cleaned up, the report said.

The removal of blight is seen as a first, obvious way to improve the city's image and spur development once Detroit exits Chapter 9 bankruptcy protection, possibly by the fall.

Detroit's bankruptcy feels for many like a fresh start for a city that for decades has endured relentless image-bashing as a decaying, crime-ridden, irretrievable and once-great urban center. So much of that reputation has been tied to home abandonment and eventual wide-scale blight, which not only breeds crime and other social ills but also just looks bad.

Duggan and other elected officials recognize the positive mood in the air when it comes to rehabilitating the city and want to seize on the opportunity to raise needed money and to make changes to city procedures in dealing with abandoned or tax-foreclosed-upon properties.

Duggan said the report can now be used by the Detroit Land Bank Authority to attack blight on multiple fronts, from suing absentee property owners of blighted structures to deciding which vacant structures to demolish and which to sell to new homeowners for rehabilitation.

"Isn't this a great day?" Duggan told the audience of at least 200 civic leaders who attended the two-hour release ceremony at Focus: HOPE. "This blight has gone on for years. It's gotten nothing but worse."

### Review board suggested

The blight report — assembled by a team led by Quicken Loans Chairman Dan Gilbert, Detroit Public Schools Foundation President Glenda Price and U-Snap-Bac Director Linda Smith — is packed with fine-grained recommendations for approaching the task.

For example, the report notes that the City Council now approves demolition of vacant properties, but that a new demolition review board should be created to streamline the process. The report also recommended that the number of demolition deferrals a property owner can seek be reduced from three to one.

And in a recommendation sure to generate controversy, Duggan and the other leaders called for an end to that portion of the annual Wayne County Treasurer's auction of tax-foreclosed properties that allows speculators to buy parcels for just \$500 per property. That creates more blight since many of those speculative buyers do nothing to fix up the properties, Smith and others said.

Duggan also said that the city will soon begin a pilot program to determine whether many of the blighted structures in the city can be

deconstructed — salvaging their wood and other materials for reuse — rather than just demolished and landfilled. Deconstruction that reuses materials and creates jobs is more desirable than simple demolition alone, Duggan said, although deconstruction may cost more and take more time.

Gilbert, one of three co-chairs of the blight task force, predicted the rest of the money would be found for the neighborhood portion of the plan.

“This is the least of the big challenges,” he said. “This money will come. This money will flow. ... We’re going to find the money and we’re going to get this done.”

### **Vast range of findings**

Carrying the title “Every Neighborhood Has a Future ... And it Doesn’t Include Blight,” the report runs 331 pages and is filled with text, photos, maps and graphics. It outlines a vast range of findings and recommendations on all aspects of the blight problem in Detroit.

The report is based in part of the Motor City Mapping survey completed earlier this year that saw teams of surveyors visit virtually every parcel in the city — more than 377,000 — to detail its condition. Once completed, that survey data were merged with 24 other databases from multiple agencies including the U.S. Postal Service and the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department to create the most complete interactive database on property in Detroit ever assembled.

In a demonstration of the mapping program at Tuesday’s event, Sean Jackson, one of Gilbert’s aides who worked on it, showed how planners can zero in on any part of the city and immediately isolate all the vacant lots or all the fire-damaged houses or all the blighted structures. The database was created primarily by the nonprofit Data Driven Detroit with consulting firm Loveland Technologies.

What Duggan called the “Star Wars” Motor City Mapping database will soon be available to the public. In about 90 days an interactive version will be made available in stages.

### **'Blight is a cancer'**

Gilbert quoted extensively from an introductory letter in the report penned by himself and his co-chairs Price and Smith.

“It is our strong belief that unless and until we eradicate the malignant disease of blight from our city, it will be near impossible to make significant progress in those areas or on any other serious issue that faces our hometown,” he said, quoting the introductory letter in the report.

He continued, “Blight is a cancer. Blight sucks the soul out of anyone who gets near it, let alone those who are unfortunate enough to live with it all around them. Blight is radioactive. It is contagious. Blight serves as a venue that attracts criminals and crime. It is a magnet for arsonists.”

And blight is a symbol, the report’s authors said, “of all that is wrong and all that has gone wrong for too many decades in the once thriving world-class city of Detroit.”

As the event was breaking up, John George, founder of the nonprofit group Motor City Blight Busters that has worked to end blight on Detroit’s west side for 26 years, commented, “From the outhouse to the White House, people understand the importance of a stable and revitalized Detroit. A clean and safe city benefits everyone.”